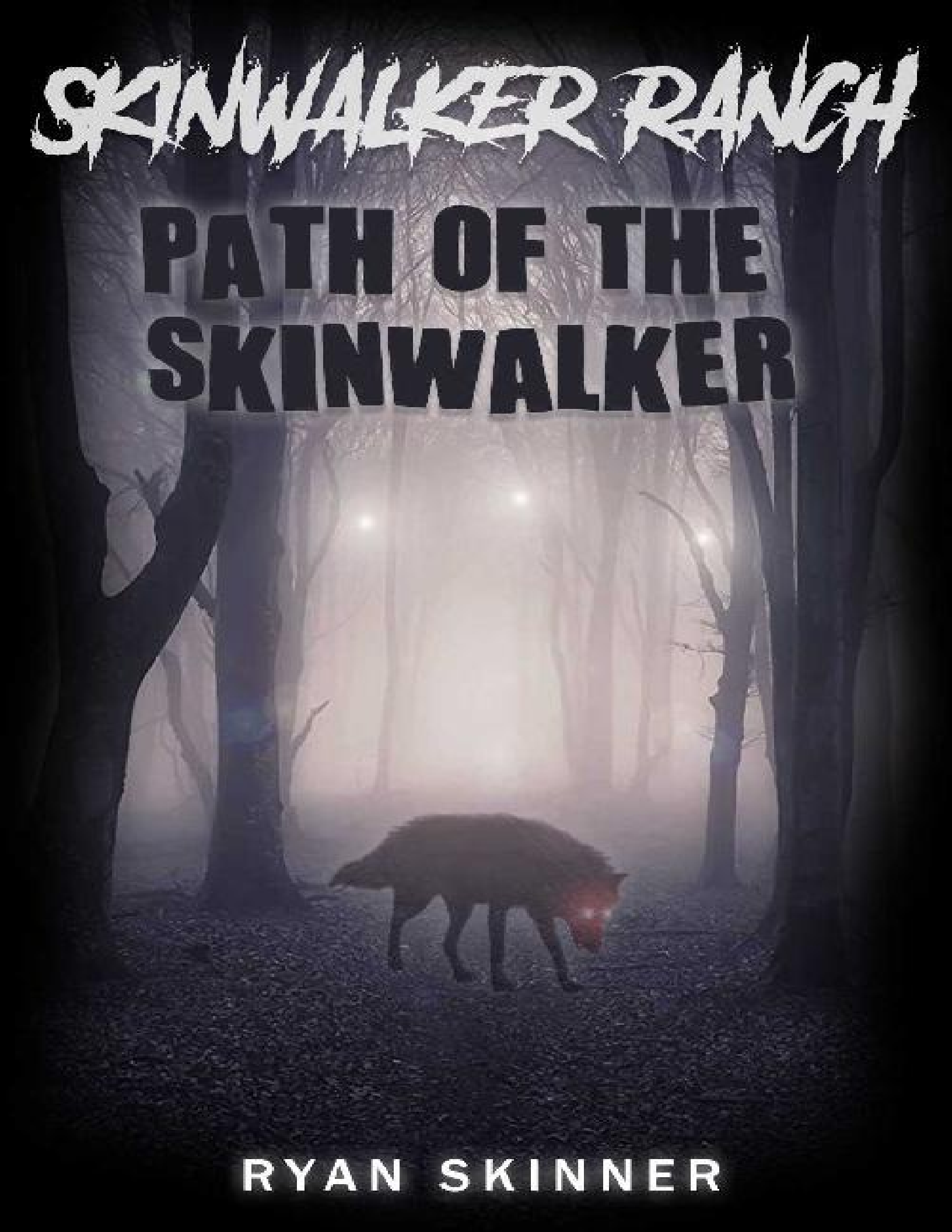
SKINWALKER RANCH

PATH OF THE SKINWALKER



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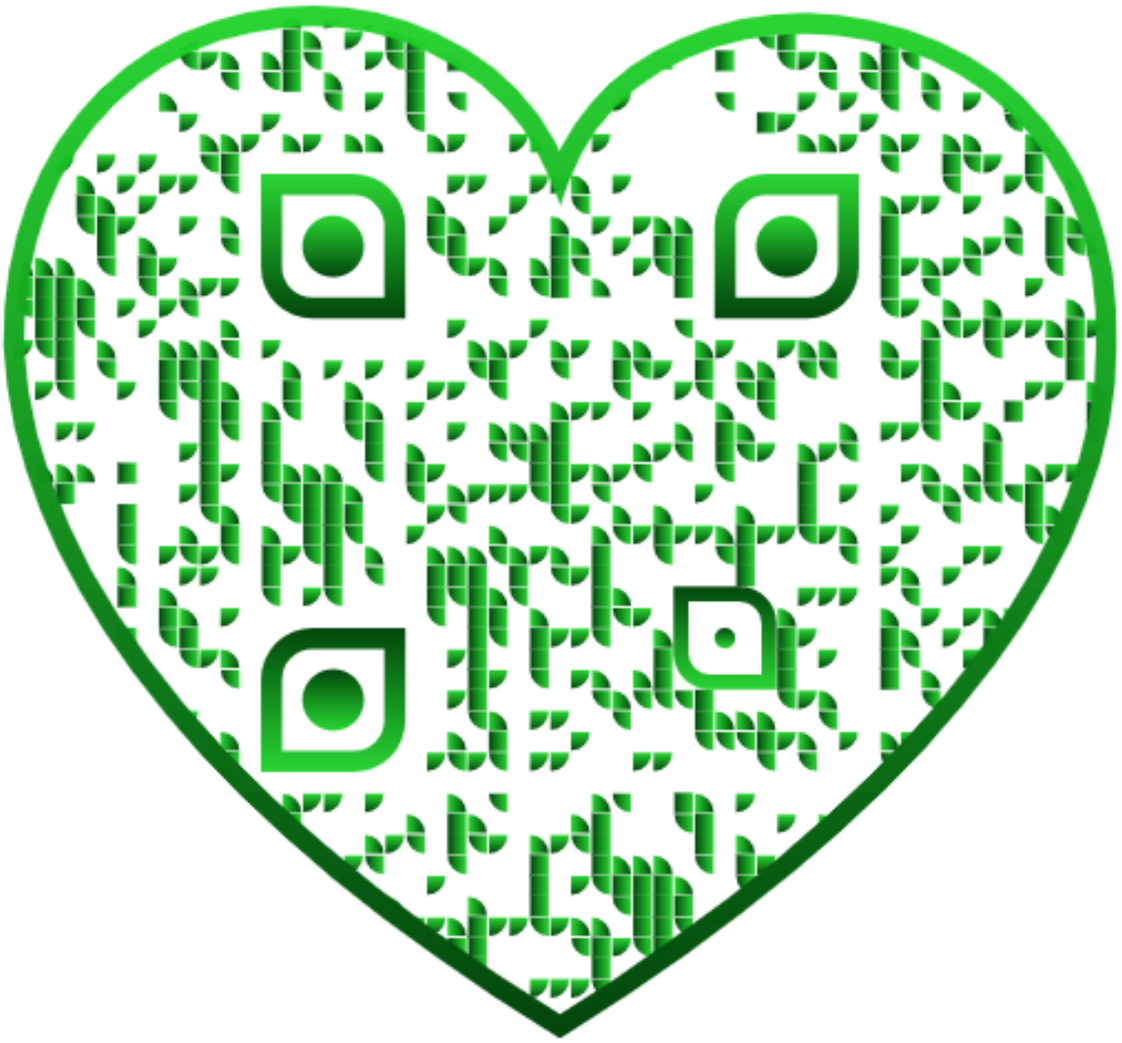

SKINWALKER RANCH

Path of the Skinwalker

By Ryan Skinner

I used to think that anyone doing anything weird was weird. I suddenly realized that anyone doing anything weird wasn't weird at all and it was the people saying they were weird that were weird.

-Paul McCartney

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One

Road Trip to Vegas

Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage—Lao Tzu

My trek into the paranormal started in the winter of 2006. It was about 1:30 in the morning and the day before New Year's. I had been driving for God only knows how many hours, fighting fatigue and boredom. I found myself staring blankly out into the dark, desolate desert road that ran ahead, paying way too much attention to the rubber of my tires as they rhythmically slapped along the paved surface. We were somewhere on I-70 cutting through the heart of Utah and heading to Las Vegas. My mind was preoccupied with thoughts of my soon- to-be wife, Iryna, who was seated there beside me and either lost in thoughts of her own or dozing. She hadn't said much these last few miles. I stole a glance in her direction to see if she was sleeping, but it was too dark to tell and I didn't want to risk waking her by asking. We were on our way from Wisconsin to Vegas to get married.

But, hey, I'm getting ahead of myself.

Meeting Iryna in the Ukraine is a bit of a story worth telling, and though not paranormal, definitely what most people would consider out of

the normal. Disappointed with the kind of girl I was constantly dating here in the States, and being somewhat whimsical and impulsive, I got involved in one of those mail-order bride things, the kind that arranges for guys like me to go overseas and meet up with girls from the other side of the world. Essentially, the trip itself amounted to little more than club-hopping, but I did meet Iryna.

She wasn't one of the girls hoping to find an American husband, but instead was a translator enlisted by the program to facilitate communication for the girls that were. Regardless, she was skinny, blonde and beautiful, and definitely caught my eye. I went up and introduced myself. Apparently the translators had been told to remain aloof and not socialize or mingle with us; but I didn't know that, and she didn't say.

She was wearing this kind of peasant girl dress, and it immediately appealed to the sense of innocence, of wholesomeness and family values that I was looking for. And despite the fact that she was projecting the airs and attitude of a runway model, I could picture her wearing jeans and eating a hot dog at the ball park. Of course, it didn't hurt any that she spoke English as well if not better than most of the girls I tended to hook up with in the States.

To make a long story short, after all the other guys who had made the trip over had returned to the States, I stayed behind and moved in with Iryna. We were together for a few months when I thought it best to go home for a

while. Over the next year or so I made a couple of trips back, and eventually convinced Iryna to come with me to the States. It wasn't long before we had settled in Wisconsin and had a son—her first child and my second. I have a daughter from a previous relationship.

We had our boy only a few months before Christmas, and our little family unit was looking forward to our first holiday celebration together. I made sure to do my part to make it a memorable one by planning a secret and a surprise. Rather than new clothing, electronic gadgets, or some other trinket all too soon forgotten, I decided to surprise Iryna with a ring and the traditional bended knee proposal. I thought it was time we were married.

Iryna, the baby and me

Come Christmas morning, I watched as Iryna began digging through

the big box that I had taken extra care to wrap and tape—especially tape. She has a thing for pop culture and Lady Gaga, so I was pretty sure she'd go for the bait imagining the statement making outfit that she was hoping for. She tried to conceal her excitement, but she was like a raccoon clawing into a discarded box of cereal.

I shrugged with feigned innocence as all her ripping and tearing managed to produce only the smaller wrapped box that I had concealed inside, and then again inside that one, one even smaller. Her exasperation, however, melted away and the glow of her eyes throwing off the flames dancing in the fireplace suddenly flared as they welled with tears. Leaving them to roll unchecked down her cheeks, she threw her arms around my neck, and between tears and I-love-you, we exchanged soft, salty kisses. But the ring was only part of the surprise. The playful smile I let slip across my face told her there was more yet to come.

"Well?" she asked, knowing I would give in.

"I would like for the two of us to drive to Vegas and get married in a few days!" I said.

There was a moment of hesitation, and I knew she was thinking about the baby.

"The baby will be fine with my parents," I assured her. "We'll only be gone a few days. He sleeps so much he'll barely know we're gone."

She gave me a scowl and took a slap at my shoulder, but she knew I was right.

So less than a week later we set out on what we thought would be a romantic fantasy—a road trip filled with excitement, adventure, and self-discovery. The furthest thing from our minds was that on the road from Wisconsin to Las Vegas we would run directly into the path of a Skinwalker. But that's exactly what happened, right there on I-70 in Utah, just south of Thompson Springs.

Two

I can’t believe what I’m seeing

But I do believe in the paranormal, that there are things our brains just can't understand—Art Bell

That encounter was something so surreal, so mind bending that Iryna and I just weren’t the same after. I found myself in a lonely, unyielding pursuit of the paranormal, and it was something that she couldn’t or wouldn’t understand. Ultimately, it became too much for our relationship. So she left me.

But again, I’m getting ahead of the story.

That last night in December of 2006, out there on that highway, I vaguely remember glancing at the car’s radio. It showed 1:36 am. My head had been bobbing up and down rather involuntarily for the last few miles, kind of like a marionette with a distracted puppeteer pulling absently at the

strings. I knew it wouldn't be long before the road was throwing dots up into my eyes. I've driven long distances at night before.

"Hey, babe," I quietly muttered reaching over to nudge Iryna. "You always wanted to learn how to drive, now would the perfect time. I'm sick of driving. I'm going to pull over." I didn't give her the chance to put up a protest.

As luck would have it a sign emerged in the not too far distance. In large whitish letters against a green background it spelled out "Scenic Viewing Area Ahead" and "Mile 186". As I steered the car off the highway and onto the exit ramp I was encouraged to see the viewing area had exceeded the bland expectations I had anticipated given the landscape to this point. Laid out before our eyes like a wrinkled bed sheet discarded by some giant was an expansive and mysterious valley.

The view out over the valley

I stepped out of the car and into the chilly December night and walked over to where I could get a good look at the scenery. The valley was silent and painted with the eerie glow of the moonlight, the peaks and crevasses like flat shadows and distinguishable one from the other only by differing shades of grey. The view was surreal as if we had been plucked from the earth and unwittingly transported to some exotic off-world.

I inhaled the dry cool air, and feeling the sudden urge to announce my presence to the vast unknown stretching below, I bellowed, “Hello, out there!”

The first syllable seemed to linger loud and long, trilling out over the

valley. Impressed with the effect, I added, “I’m here!”—just in case there was someone actually out there, some unforeseen host lurking down within those haunting shadows and expecting my arrival.

But it was only the valley itself that paid me any mind, responding rather lazily and half-heartedly, the faint echo of my own voice drifting back to me from the distant hills.

To this day I am left to wonder if perhaps there really was someone or something that I had disturbed, something that I had unwittingly invited with my call, and that unbeknown to me at the time had accepted that invitation.

Thinking nothing more of the surreal or off-worlds, I turned my attention to my driving student, opened the passenger door and got in. I had more worldly concerns—sitting beside a beautiful, 22 year old Ukrainian who had never driven a car before. In fact, a vast majority of Russian women don’t own or drive cars. If there’s someplace they need to go, they either walk or take a taxi or bus. It’s a cultural thing: men drive.

“Beautiful out there isn’t it,” I said, attempting to lighten the moment.

Iryna ignored my attempt and instead whined, “How much further until the hotel? I’m tired.”

“Not too far,” I assured her, without really being sure how far. It’s not like there were a whole bunch of landmarks out here. The last sign I remember seeing said “Norwood”, and that was back a while not too long

after clearing Colorado. I guessed we were somewhere between Cisco and Elba.

She reached up and jingled the keys with a tap of her finger nails. “How do you start this thing?”

The Jeep Cherokee that we were driving was an automatic, thankfully. I reached out with one hand and turned an imaginary key. At the same time I gestured to the gear shift on the center console and pretended to put the car in gear. She turned the key and the car started. She gripped the gear shift and put the Cherokee into drive and then stepped gingerly upon the gas pedal. The jeep lurched into gear with the uncertainty of a mutt finding the yard gate unlatched, and then not being able to make up his mind between bolting off at full gallop and nosing forward cautiously. Whimsically I remembered a funny Russian saying: A woman learning to drive a car is like handing a grenade to a monkey. I decided it was probably best at the moment to keep this one to myself.

The road open and straight, and nothing to speak of in the way of other cars, we passed the miles without incident. A quick glance at the dashboard clock showed the time to be 2:05 in the AM. Green River, Utah, and the comforts of our hotel couldn’t be all that far ahead.

The road ahead continued to be dark and empty, and apparently we the only car with any interest in this lonely stretch of desert. As the miles fell

away behind us, I once again felt the rhythm and the hum of the road weaving its spell over me. My eyes couldn't have been closed for but a moment, when suddenly Iryna broke the silence with a sharp scream.

"What the hell is that!?" she demanded, a hint of wonder to her voice.

Opening my eyes I saw that the inside of the car was bathed in the unearthly glow of a brilliant ruby red light which was reflecting off of the rearview mirror. I turned to look back over my shoulder through the rear window of the car. What at first impression looked to be a sparkler—the kind kids run around with on 4th of July—hung suspended in midair, directly behind our car and off in the distance.

"Really, what is it?" Repeated Iryna more forcefully. She had this habit of using the word *really* as a form of interjection when she was mad or excited.

"Probably just the reflection of a street light," I said, but the hairs bristling on the back of my neck seemed to suggest otherwise.

I leaned deeper into the back seat to get a better view. What I saw was not a street light. It was elongated, rather rectangular in shape, and the bright light itself seemed to be surrounded by an opaque body or structure which was more prominent at one end than the other. But I knew even as I was saying so that it was a poor attempt on my part to rationalize the mysterious illumination, and as much for my own peace of mind as for Iryna's. After all,

how many street lights are there that hang in the air in the middle of the road and move? I didn't look to see, but we had to be going at least 60 mph and whatever the source, the light was keeping pace.

How could a normal light radiate such a perplexing reflection? The light coming off the rearview mirror was as bright as if it was right there in the car with us. I had to shake my head to clear the cloud of desperation that was threatening to envelope my mind.

I reminded myself that I was an intelligent and rationale guy, and that there was a logical explanation. I got control over my racing mind and worked at making a mental list of logical possibilities.

Was this simply the reflection of common highway street lights? Regretfully, this stretch of highway was absent any sort of roadside lighting. All I could make out in the dark was the barren outline of distant mountains highlighted by the glow of the retreating moon.

Had someone, perhaps, retrofitted his sports car with aftermarket headlights? Those halogen ones come in all different shapes, sizes and colors beyond the traditional white light. But then we would being seeing two distinct beams. All I saw was a single red flame, as if some fairy tale Cyclops, its one eye bloodshot and afire, was trying to chase down our fleeing vehicle.

Or perhaps it was as simple as we in our front row seats were the sole

witnesses of the otherworldly mirage of a brilliant star in its last dying moments.

“Pull the car over,” I stammered, my voice giving away my less than certain resolve.

Like a city girl on a horse for the first time, Iryna finally managed to convince the car who was in charge and we rolled off of the highway and to a stuttering stop upon the shoulder. The car’s headlights reached out into the darkness casting foreboding shadows across the desert landscape. An irrational embrace of fear began to make its way down my spine and I involuntarily shivered as if some mischievous friend had slipped an ice cube down my shirt.

I found the door handle with nervous fingers and hesitated for but a moment. Then resolved, I flung the door open fully aware that I had just removed the only barrier between the anomalous unknown there outside the vehicle and the haven within my own sanity.

Like a blind man I refused to accept the situation as anything more than my senses told me. I began examining the car peering into each window sure that I’d find the source of light. Failing to find the luminous culprit, my attention was suddenly drawn to my feet which had cast a long shadow, the edges of which were tinged by a hypnotic pulsating red glow. As if in a trance, I noticed that my shadow appeared to be elongating and narrowing on

its own as if struggling to free itself from the hellish glow tormenting it. Like a shadowy doppelganger, it seemed to sense the urgency of the situation more than I, for it had the good sense to keep its face turned from whatever monstrosity it was that lurked at my back while I was tempted to turn and look.

I did turn and look. There before my unbelieving eyes was an amorphous ball of flame suspended without sound in the chilly desert air. It hovered five feet from the ground and no more than thirty feet from our car. The orb began to pulsate, inhaling and exhaling its fiery breath in bursts of hot red as if the air molecules themselves were kindling feeding the ghastly display. It was as if I had been transported into some Land of Oz, only there was no magic ruby slippers to shake me from my nightmare.

Those bursts of energy must have short-circuited my mind because I began to spiral into a sense of confusion and panic. I might have lost it right there if not for a more authoritative voice in my head which rose up over the din, “It’s either fight or flight.”

My jaw fell slack, my chin dangled against my goose bump riddled neck. I made the effort to scream but no sound came out, only the shapeless shrill of a pleading whimper that sounded like it came from someone else, but surely not me. I mouthed the words, “Oh, my God! I can’t believe what I’m seeing. This is really it!” However, in my current state of mind I had no

definition or description of what *it* might be.

Before I had time to fully take in the horror there in front of me, my frozen state of shock was shattered by a painful shriek behind me.

“Ryan!” screamed Iryna. “There are three things walking towards us!” Her voice sounded frail and each syllable cracked.

Hesitating, I chanced a quick gaze away from the fiery orb and glanced in her direction. From out of the field on our left were three dark entities moving straight towards the car.

Looking back, I’m not going to say they were doing anything that was all that menacing or threatening, but then and there, I was scared out of my mind and everything was magnified. Whatever they were, they weren’t human and they were coming right at us.

Mustering what remained of my courage and shaken manhood, I shouted in as commanding a tone as I could manage, “Get the in the car NOW!”

We scurried around the car like mice alerted to the stalking cat, crossing each other in a macabre game of Chinese Fire Drill. If there was an internal debate as to whether fight or flight was the better of the two options, my panic stricken mind had firmly sided with the option of flight—and damn fast.

I have no recollection of actually getting into the car, and I’m not

even sure if I had checked to see that Iryna was safely aboard. All I do remember was that I smashed down on the gas pedal practically embedding it into the floor boards. The tires screamed as if the stalking cat failed to get its tail out of the way in time. The speedometer leapt to 87 miles per hour, but unfortunately that was all the jump she had. I couldn't coax her to go any faster.

Willing and nimble, our Jeep Cherokee roared down the desert highway, the red ball of light in unshakable pursuit.

"Why won't this thing go any damn faster?" I asked, as if accusing the Jeep's anonymous designer of engineering incompetency. "I don't want to be abducted," I repeated over and over.

Visibly shaken, Iryna stared back at me her face lined with fear and shock.

The chasing light effortlessly kept pace giving no indication that it was willing to let us distance ourselves from it fiery presence. It was as if we were human prey.

We passed a highway sign that read "Rest Area Ahead". I'd never seen anything so welcoming.

"I'm taking that exit. I'm not going to let this thing abduct us and do who-knows-what to us".

A photo of the exact rest spot off of I-70

My racing mind conjured images of grey insect-like aliens dissecting us as we were being shuttled away to some distant planet. I had thoughts of my children—my eight year-old and the baby I hardly knew—growing up without parents, hearing stories about how mom and dad had both simply vanished. The ache in my heart served to strengthen my resolve: we were going to escape.

“Maybe we can scare the light away if there are enough people to see this, or at least someone will know what happened to us,” I said, spinning the steering wheel towards the exit.

What must have looked to others like a jeep pursued by a police car without headlights, its lone red strobe light flashing as we sped into the rest

area. I hit the brakes hard and the Cherokee slid to an abrupt halt before several slumbering semis. I frantically began leaning on the horn hoping to rouse the sleeping truckers. Despite the obnoxious cawing of my horn, not a single light jumped from a single semi-truck or car. There wasn't a single sleepy curse or even a pissed off truck driver. The vehicles themselves sat silent and abandoned. We were pleading with ghosts.

Looking quickly about the parking lot I saw there were a number of what appeared to be empty cars, their doors left hanging open. Our cries for help fell only on the ears of coyotes in the distance who howled back a hungry reply.

Three

Showdown

There are very few monsters who warrant the fear we have of them—Andre Gide

To our surprise and relief the light suddenly of its own volition veered off towards a surrounding field and ascended a nearby ridgeline. As soon as it reached the crest, it extinguished itself with the suddenness of a birthday candle.

“Where’d it go?” we excitedly asked each other in unison.

“Hopefully back to its home planet,” I joked. The random twitching of my hands and resounding thump, thump, thump of my heartbeat surging between my ears had me thinking how close we had come to a one way flight into the mysterious unknown. I felt the blood begin to find its way back to my ashen face.

“I can’t believe no one woke up. Let’s go check out these cars. I think

they might be empty". The croak in my voice told me I wasn't quite myself yet.

I pulled the car up to the closest of the abandoned vehicles. It was a rusty blue 1998 Cavalier. Three of the four doors stood wide open providing a generous view of the interior. I cautiously pulled our car closer to get a better look inside. An unexpected gust of wind arose shaking the car's doors like the unwilling wings of a wounded bird. Rolling my window down to get a better look, I noticed a jacket, a cell phone, a child's toy and a purse all sitting idly inside. Given the proximity of our recent encounter, my first thought was that the owners had fled in panic from the same alien presence. From there my imagination got the better of me, and I considered that they had been disintegrated by some sort of ET molecular ray, only nothingness and personal effects left behind. Or perhaps they all had been abducted by that ball of red light that we luckily had managed to elude, victims of a fate far more unimaginable than any morbid thoughts I could come up with.

I looked over at Iryna and said, "I've got to get out and check this out."

She replied pleadingly, "Ryan, don't go. I have a really bad feeling about this; something bad is going to happen to you if you do."

With the car in park and idling, and Iryna unaware that I had already teased my car door open, I made ready to act on my intent to delve further

into this mystery. Our eyes locked for a brief moment; the tension evident in the arc of her eyebrows relaxed, but her eyes were yet pleading with me not to leave. Any thoughts of heroism that I had at that moment wavered in her gaze, the fear in her voice. Okay, so I would be a coward—but a safe coward. I pressed my finger down on the automatic door lock, the solid “cachunk” of the mechanism locking the danger outside.

I have to admit it was a surreal moment, as if we were actors cast in some science fiction horror movie. Only there was no script. Whether tragic or comedic, the fate of the characters was a matter of improvisation, one event linked to the next until the night played out. No one knew how it would end.

But whatever was happening out there this night was real and no movie. There were real consequences for the people who had been in those cars. Iryna was right; we had to get the hell out of there. Thanks to her instincts and insistence, I am blessed to be sitting here at this moment able to share this unbelievable, yet absolutely true story with you.

Taking Iryna’s advice I put the car into drive and turned around to point our way out of the rest area, get back on the highway and hopefully leave this nightmare behind us. There was nothing more I wanted than to put some distance between us and this spooky stretch of desert road.

I had intended this trip as an interpersonal journey between two new

lovers making an effort to discover one another, whether by will or by fortune. But this wasn't quite what I had in mind when I thought a little closeness would allow us to really get to know each other. It is amazing, however, what you can learn about the one you love when you are both locked in a metal cage on wheels, seat belts restraining you like shackles to a dungeon wall.

We were two prisoners in love confined to a 6' x 12' moving steel box, placing what we had in the way of faith and hope in the journey ahead rather than the mysteries that lay behind. Our mutual experiment in socialization, though tortured by paranormal variables neither one of us could have foreseen—or even conceived, was nonetheless in its own way succeeding.

In a tone meant to expose my current tender and somewhat fragile state, I said, "I just want you to know that I love you and that I know that I don't say it enough." I paused a moment and then added, "I was really afraid something was going to happen to us back there, and that we would never see one another again."

The only response I received for pouring out a bit of my heart was an awkward silence. And then Iryna said, "Oh, Ryan, I think it's back."

I followed her line of sight across her side of the car and out towards the dimly lit rest area. Sure enough, about halfway between there and the hill

over which we had lost the thing chasing us, there was a red glow moving across the field and moving in our direction.

Four different photos of the ruby red light

As if on command the tendons in my foot tensed, my calf muscles instantly contracted, my fingers dug into the leathery skin of the steering wheel and I sped off into the night out ahead of us. I again drove the gas pedal to the floor, my foot like a sledgehammer falling heavily on a stake in the ground. My mind was possessed with one thought—escape.

Iryna's voice, incongruously calm against the moment's panic, snapped me back to myself. "Ryan, Isn't this what you've been looking for your entire life?" she asked. "I mean, here it is and you're running from it."

That was one of the things that attracted me to her in the first place,

there back in the Ukraine: she had this air of fearlessness about her.

Her words resonated throughout my mind, sweeping the cob webs from the dark memories of things that terrified me as a child: monsters lurking in the dark recesses of my bedroom; dark shadows in the corners of my room whispering unknown secrets; the sudden tug of my bed sheets as some unwelcomed and invisible intruder sought to crawl beneath the covers beside me in my small bed; or the recurring nightmares which haunted me night after night only to hide in the forgetfulness of my waking conscious. Too many were the nights that I would cry myself back to sleep comforted only by the tears which fell upon the layers of blankets I wrapped about myself, a barrier between *it* and me.

This same fearful boy still lived within the man I had become. I had not forgotten nor abandoned him. At the age of seven he had pleaded to know the truth and promised himself that once he became older and wiser, he would seek out that which had terrified him as a boy. And here I was now, that very boy, confronted by that thing. Here before me was the opportunity to find out what it was really that lay behind this incorporeal veil that separates our world from theirs. The esoteric truth—the answers to which I have been destined—was here for me in the desert of Utah, here within the uncertainty of an outcome that I could not predict.

Iryna was right. I had to know the truth at any cost, wherever that

pursuit may lead. If not for me then for the fearful boy sheltered within. I took the moment to tell myself that it was okay to be afraid of things we don't understand, that when we risk a confrontation with what we think is a "paranormal truth"—and that truth is confirmed—that we may very well find ourselves trapped in a nightmare of apocalyptic proportion. I'll say with all honesty, at the end of that moment, as both an investigator and pursuer of "paranormal truth", I considered avoidance of the supernatural question itself as the wiser choice, preferring the tentative hold I had on sanity to the stark realization that monsters are real, they do walk this earth, and our very lives are haunted.

Hesitating no longer, I stammered an answer to her challenge. "You know, you're right, you're absolutely right. I don't know what we are going to see or what will happen to us, but I want to see it."

With all the false bravado of an unproven soldier in battle for the first time and facing a real enemy, I willed myself to pull the car off the highway and face my childhood fears.

"What are you afraid of?" I said to myself admonishingly. "Fear is nothing more than acknowledging the unknown"—and of course the sequence of events and consequences to follow. That much I had to admit.

Not yet fully convinced, I told myself that fear is nothing more than nature's built-in safety mechanism, a way to ensure our survival, a counter-

measure as it were to curiosity, intelligence and free-will. And it is this sense of free-will that separates me—a man—from the lesser critters, that gives me the power to stand my ground, to assess whether the moment is altruistic or hostile.

I made the demand of myself that I would proceed rationally, that I would think and assess, that I would not turn and flee because someone popped the proverbial paper bag. I would take my next step in human evolution and stride full into the unknown. Here was the paranormal moment that would bring a lifetime of experiences—even if most are languishing back in my childhood—into focus, to validate the esoteric phenomena that has been with me all my life. Only then will I find the words that will make familiar this thing “alien”, opening a door for all as individuals to know an ever evolving intelligent race and to ascend to higher levels of universal consciousness.

My mind was made up. I took a look around and there was nothing to stop me, no other cars in sight. I threw the car in reverse. “Get the camera,” I told Iryna. “It’s in the bag on the floor behind my seat.”

“I’m going backward,” I warned her. “We have our first proof there’s really something here. Isn’t it?” I asked as if seeking her confirmation.

She had reached behind me and had the camera in her hands. It was nothing fancy, just a simple video camera, but it would do the trick.

“Start recording,” I said.

“I’m recording,” she answered.

It was definitely an intense feeling, speeding backwards on a dark highway and in the wrong direction with the full disorientation of looking out the back window of the jeep.

“There’s something in the fucking road,” I said, sure that I could make something out. “I’m going to go back towards it, okay?” I wanted Iryna to know what I was planning.

“It’s just lights, Ryan. I recognize them.” She said, rather matter of fact.

Her tone told me that she wasn’t referring to the lights that were following us.

“It’s not,” I said, and I wasn’t looking up in the sky. “It’s something in the road. It’s something back there.” I was certain. “You need to get your head out there,” I told her, meaning out of the open window so she could get a good shot. “Can you see it? Is it gone? When the car came, did it disappear?”

I heard the disappointment in her tone. “Yeah, it disappeared.”

Whatever it was that I thought I saw in the road was now gone too. We waited a few moments, both of us trying to peer through the near lightless dark for any sign that the alien presence, whatever it was, was still there.

“Come on, let’s go,” I said, resigned to the fact that we were wasting time. Iryna put up no argument.

We were back on the road for only a matter of minutes before I caught the light again in the rearview mirror. “Holy shit! It’s following us.”

I pushed down on the pedal and the jeep surged forward, scaring Iryna.

“Oh, my God, Ryan,” she gasped. But then her voice really turned nervous. “I don’t know,” she blurted out—another of her misplaced exclamations. “Something moved over there.”

“Where’s the light?” I screamed at her. “Where’s the light? Get ready with the fucking camera. Get the camera. I can drive.” And then I saw it. “Oh, my God! What’s behind us? Oh, my God.” My voice was quick and excited. “Get that thing on film,” I shouted.

A solid orange light like a flying parallelogram darted from left to right across the darkness just beyond the rear window of the Cherokee. And then there was a red one, not quite as distinguishable in terms of shape, but just as solid a luminous body as the orange one.

“Get that thing on film,” I shouted a second time.

But Iryna didn’t see it. “What? Tell me,” she said, her Ukrainian accent unmistakable in her excitement.

“Get your head out there and get it on film,” I yelled at her none too

sensitively.

“I can’t, I can’t,” she whined. “I’m super cold, Ryan.”

I paid no mind to her complaining. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do.” It was as if I was in debate with myself.

Just at that instant a third entity passed just in back of the vehicle. This one was more, yellow in color, more of a brief streak than any particular geometric shape.

“Behind us,” I commanded to Iryna. “Keep recording.”

“Shut it down,” she was saying. “Shut it down.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. “Shut what down?”

She was pointing at the passenger side window. “That!”

But by that time it didn’t matter. We got on camera whatever we were going to get at the moment. We were once again alone. Our paranormal tag-alongs had vanished.

Taking a moment to catch my breath and internalize what had just happened, I said, “That was a rush. I can’t wait to see the video.”

Iryna could only think to tell me she was cold.

It was a bit chilly. “I’ll put the heat on and you can warm up as we go.” I took one last look around and started back in the right direction.

But it was as if they were toying with us. We had gone no more than a few hundred yards at the best when Iryna reached over and grabbed my arm.

“Ryan!” she said, her tone disbelieving. “I don’t think it’s over. That same light…look! It’s back,” she said, tilting her head towards the passenger-side window. “Out my window, there in the field, it’s following us again!” She was shouting.

I immediately pulled the Cherokee off the road not bothering to look over my shoulder to see if there was anyone coming. Looking out to where Iryna was pointing, I overshot the shoulder by a few yards and came to stop on the dirt beyond.

Our otherworldly nemesis for the night had returned, but this time not alone. It was accompanied by two fiery companions. Like some late night rave in the desert, the ground beneath them came alive with the iridescent glow of their dancing and pulsating beams. There hovering before our astonished eyes were what appeared to be three brilliant roadside flares, all in tandem formation, and somehow having taken flight up to the star-lighted sky just over our heads. Like malfunctioning robots, circuits overloaded, every so often they discharged shards of electrical light, violent flashes bursting from this or that fiery specter as they gained on us.

Looking through the passenger window we watched three small balls of light hovering slightly above the dusty desert floor and gliding towards us. They were no larger than golf balls, maybe a child’s fist. We waited in silent anticipation as the mysterious glowing entities danced about the dry brush,

half-expecting the tinder to burst into sudden flame. Slowly they moved ever closer to our car. Our eyes were glued to them as together they bobbed up and down in the air like orbs floating on invisible waves, their lights dimming and flaring in unison. The tension was suddenly broken by Iryna's trembling hand stabbing awkwardly at my shoulder with small karate chops, each attempting to reach my hand.

"Ryan, Ryan, Ryan, its coming!" she said with each jarring poke.

Clutching her trembling fingers, I said, "Everything's going to be alright." I was sure, though, that my eyes betrayed the confidence of my words.

The lights of all three objects extinguished momentarily. Alone in the dark we gave each other a quick glance as if we both wanted to say, "I think they are gone".

And just like that, the tranquil darkness was interrupted by a brilliant red flash of light, all three of the objects reappearing no more than ten feet from our car door. I was mesmerized by the ruby glow reflecting off of the car's hood and bathing the interior of the car. Like a ventriloquist's puppet, Iryna's head turned toward me mechanically and slowly, her jaw dropping open as if unhinged. No words came out.

In giddy excitement, and as if I were some acknowledged expert on the topic of paranormal behavior, I whispered, "I didn't know they could do

that.”

Our heads snapped back to the mysterious lights outside our window there waiting patiently.

Now, I realize this is not the best time in the story to go off on a tangent, but it’s a thought worth sharing and gives an idea where I’m coming from.

I had always been an avid reader of paranormal literature, familiar with popular UFO case files, and at one time an active member of MUFON. But no amount of UFO books, videos, memberships or spooky campfire stories could have prepared me for the crisp reality of what was to happen next.

I don’t count myself an expert on a subject matter which defies definition and an intelligence which despite the intense scrutiny of the world’s brightest scientific minds has managed to keep itself from discovery. But who does?

Four

The ghost particle

Any sufficiently advanced technology
Is indistinguishable from magic—Arthur C. Clarke

Scientists have long theorized the existence of dark matter because they can observe and even measure its effect and distribution throughout the universe. Yet there remains a challenge they have yet to overcome. Despite the conviction that dark matter exists, it continues to elude confirmation by scientific method. So regardless of its very real influence and the hushed confidence of scientists supporting its validity, dark matter is no more substantial it terms of tangible reality than the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, or for that matter, inter-dimensional beings bobbing up and down in the skies over remote regions of the Utah desert.

If you need further convincing, we can entertain the Higgs Boson

particle. Likewise theoretical, it yet had remained equally elusive until March of 2013 when scientists at the Large Hadron Collider tentatively confirmed its existence, and that only after 50 years of observing its effects.

According to the Huffington post, 48% of Americans now believe we are being visited by aliens. Does it sound reasonable that nearly half the population is raving mad, wishful thinkers, or experience with regularity fanatical hallucinations of spacemen? Further lending validity to the alien theory is that the percentage of believers is increasing measurably with each passing year. When an effect is statistically verifiable the precursor can logically be theorized to exist. There's an age old adage that states, "Where there is smoke there is fire".

The Higgs Boson particle was like a ghost to scientists. Theoretical in terms of existence, actual confirmation eluded scientific observation for years. With the recent construction of the Large Hadron Collider scientists now command the tools necessary to unravel the particle's ethereal robes, exposing the secrets shrouded beneath. Perhaps one day such a machine will be constructed to bridge the emptiness between our world and the next. Then alien theory, whether in horror or splendor, will stand unchallenged, mankind a witness to the biological dissection of some prior to unimaginable entity of ectoplasm, the question as to the existence of aliens forever put to rest.

Alright, sufficient rambling. Back to the story.

For two young lovers intently staring out their car window the day of reckoning was already at hand.

Five

Shadow stalkers

Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see a shadow.-Helen Keller

Our rapid breaths began to fog-up the car glass which was all that separated us from the source of mounting terror that lurked outside. The condensation began to bead and run down the inside of the windows like blood trickling from an open gash.

I braced myself with my right arm on the center console and leaned across Iryna's lap to get a better view. "You're going to have to open that window," I whispered, my voice without much shape.

Reluctantly Iryna rolled down the window on her side, the cold air pushing into the car. What happened next was beyond comprehension. There before our disbelieving eyes were what looked to be three ruby gemstones, each spitting hot sparks into the cool desert air. Then all of a sudden all three

lights flickered and dimmed and out of the seeming nothingness there appeared the distinct outline of large, black almond-shaped eyes. And as the remaining light started to fade, a twinkle lent depth to the eyes and I saw that they were insect-like and sunken into the disproportionately large heads that were materializing around them. The shadowy outline of three aliens came into view, their spindly arms outstretched from near emaciated and child-like bodies so that they looked like a trio of demented scarecrows freed from their watch post.

The pounding adrenaline spiked THUMP, THUMP, THUMP of my heartbeat drowned out whatever words Iryna was frightfully mouthing.

“Calm down,” a voice inside my head ordered.

Only I wasn’t sure it was my voice. It could very well be the projection of the phantom at my window. Robotically I obeyed, taking several deep breaths and each steeling my nerves.

Peering out the passenger side window, I croaked, “We mean you no harm, we aren’t going to hurt you.” I ‘m not sure if it was the cold or because I was scared, but I was stuttering.

In hindsight I find my choice of opening lines, especially to what in all likelihood was a superior intelligence, frightfully hilarious if not presumptuously familiar. It reminded me of going to a bar and nervously approaching that first pretty girl. Frantically scrambling for a conversation

piece, I blurt out, “Do you come here to drink?” And then I make things even more awkward by uttering this charmer: “I bet there are some creeps that hit on girls like you”.

Likewise, one of the three specters cocked its head sideways as if to say, “Are you kidding me?”

I began to court the strange apparitions by asking, “Can you communicate with us?”

The tallest of the three blinked its eyes, but offered no reply. The only sound was the faint whistle of the wind as it ticked our hair and whispered in our ears. The surrounding desert was oddly silent, as if it too paid homage to these otherworldly visitors.

Not the real thing, but a sketch of the alien we saw

I suddenly thought of the video camera which Iryna had put back in the case behind my seat. As if my hand belonged to some re-animated zombie, it dragged my arm slowly to reach around to where the case was. I kept my head locked in its frozen pose, my eyes on the frightful sight before us. My only thought was to reach the camera and capture a video record of an actual close encounter—that is if we managed to survive the night.

Now I realize it's hard to believe that with three aliens outside my car I was thinking vindication. But I was. If I could only get a few seconds of video I could prove once and for all to my doubting family and friends that the truth really is out there. I could show that these silly superstitious beliefs of mine were more than just the overactive imagination of a child who had read too many fairy tales. Here were the monsters within those books pealed free of their two dimensional pages and standing before me as indisputable proof!

This was the chance I've been waiting for, to awaken the masses to what I have always known deep down inside—we are not alone. We co-exist with an alien consciousness beyond human understanding. We exist within a matrix whereby individuals who are willing to question the collective paradigm of reality may one day catch a brief glimpse beyond the illusionary construct of what we believe to be real, to witness the amazing truth beyond: Human intelligence is not alone, nor is it master of its own domain. We are

but a small part of an ever expanding lineage of conscious beings co-existing within an infinite multiverse.

I wanted to be the one to rip back the curtain shrouding the Wizard of Oz and expose the man concealed behind strategically pulling levers and pushing buttons. His display of smoke and lights deluding the fearful and unquestioning audience to believe they are in the presence of a god, blinding them to the truth.

However, before I could do any of this I had to get my hands on the camera.

My searching fingers continued to feel their way about the backseat. Feeling plastic, my hand clutched at the camera like a spider snatching at an ensnared fly. Hugging it to my chest, I awkwardly fumbled for the power button. As I did, I stole a quick glance outside at my photographic prize. It seemed too easy. All three creatures were standing as still as statues, as if patiently awaiting the command to say “Cheese!”

But then the battery light on my camera began blinking that taunting green color that indicates a state of low battery power.

“No, not now!” I hissed in frustration.

Then as I had feared the green light was replaced by the defeating color of red. The battery had failed.

“No way,” I growled. “This is a fully charged battery.”

The figures outside crept closer to the car as if Iryna and I were suddenly more than just a passing curiosity.

My mind made-up to leave this frightful scene behind, I turned the car keys. The engine responded with a half-hearted belch. I tried again, nothing. Like the camera, the car too had been drained of all power. Whatever was outside was feeding on energy like electronic vampires. We had lost our last chance at escape.

With the sickening realization that my relentless pursuit of the paranormal may have gone too far and that I had put both our lives in danger, I shouted across to Iryna, “Roll up the window, lock the door!”

She robotically hammered down the lock with a booming thud.

“Now get the window. Shut the damn window!” I screamed.

Rather than attending to the window, Iryna turned towards me. Her once bright eyes were blank, her mouth hanging as if unhinged. Everything after that happened in slow motion, as if time refused to follow its logical, steady course.

Iryna wasn’t moving and the alien beings outside were closing in. I recoiled from the face that stared back at me for it was no longer the face of my fiancé. Perhaps it was the shock or the whim of the visitors, but Iryna was lost. What sat next to me was the hollow shell of my former love, her lips grimaced in a ghastly pose.

In a voice breaking with emotion, I screeched, “Iryna, snap out of it, the window. Please, rollup the window!”

She looked confused as if I was speaking a foreign language. She didn’t move. In a rush I dove across her lap, frantically whirling the handle in circles until the window was firmly shut.

I had a sudden flash back to my childhood. I was playing in my parents’ garden, merrily dropping insects into a large glass jar. My eyes wide with fascination, I watched as they wriggled and squirmed to escape their transparent prison. The woeful master of all multi-legged minions was I.

Now the tables had turned. It was Iryna and I who were trapped behind the glass, and the insects—the creatures seemingly alien—doing the watching, their bulbous black eyes amused by our futile attempts at escape.

Mustering what little courage remained, I forced myself to look at the apparitions before me. Several of my observations struck me as odd—I mean beyond the peculiarity of the bizarre situation itself. The most noticeable being that the visitors appeared out of phase. They struck me as vacillating or oscillating between two worlds or dimensions, like ghostly images overlapping on a television screen or residing in some obscure region between one channel and another.

You see, we recognize the paranormal through some influence we perceive as not normal or even super-normal, something beyond what we by

mutual consent perceive to be normal in terms of time and space. Perhaps these alien beings were moving in a kind of limbo, a state between this world and some other. They were shadow-like, visible yet without substance. I vaguely saw through their murky mass, their ethereal bodies darkening the desert foliage beyond. Large black eyes inspected us like surgeons determining where to make the first incision. Imposing, they conveyed a sense of wonderment, of mystery and of impending danger. I dared not stare too long for fear of my soul becoming lost within the black depths.

One feature I do clearly remember is the tight fitted clothing that all three appeared to be wearing, similar to a diver's wetsuit. However, there were numerous tubes connected about it in no particular order. What they were, or the function they served, bewildered me.

I remember one other disturbing feature, and again only vaguely like a man with a hangover trying to piece together the previous night. Covering their face was what looked to be an intricate mask, the illusion of disproportionate flesh and bone. At the time it occurred to me that the large head, the protruding black eyes and the pencil thin line for lips were no more alien in appearance than say, a man wearing a gasmask. But perhaps it was just my subconscious mind's final struggle to salvage my sanity personifying something which was not human to begin with. Regardless, I'm not ashamed to admit I was scared shitless.

The trance which had captivated Iryna began to loosen its hold, her eyes once again alive and alert. Her gapping mouth snapped closed, her teeth clicking audibly together.

In the distance the first ray of sunlight cautiously peeked over the eastern horizon, lighting the Books Cliff ridgeline with a narrow stab of yellow as if through a keyhole and into a dark room. As suddenly as the visitors had arrived, so too had they left, dissipating with the morning fog as it gave way to the morning's rays. There were no goodbyes, no ominous warnings of global destruction, no spiritual message of peace or impending doom. But best of all, no anal probe or late night joyride through some dimensional wormhole.

The experience left me both confused and intrigued, and with some questions to which I had no answers: Who were these strangers who graced us with their celestial presence? Had they traveled here from light years away navigating the recesses of space in minuscule ships formed of light? Or had they slipped through some dimensional wormhole, the denizens of some Cthulhu-like plane of existence beyond the finite comprehension of our brains? Had they existed on this planet long before terrestrial life emerged from the primordial ooze? Or perhaps it is we who are the aliens and they the terrestrial entities, ancestors of the earth long before the dawn of man.

Iryna did not share my sentiment. In a resolute tone, she said, "I don't

know what that was. I don't want to talk about it. I just want to go."

I let the excitement fall from my face. Nodding my head, I again attempted to start the car. This time the engine had an immediate response to the turn of my key, and set to idling contently. The time was 5:36 am. Several hours had passed since we had pulled off the highway. The rising sun was bright at our backs, the brilliant yellow rays warming the interior of the car and lifting our spirits. We both felt the nightmarish memories of the night receding into the darkness behind us. We were back on the road to Vegas.

Iryna before we started back to Wisconsin

Six

An itch that couldn’t be scratched

He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life.- Muhammad Ali

Although we traveled together to Las Vegas, the seeds of an obsession had been deeply sown within me and were taking root. An itch that couldn’t be scratched gnawed at my very being. I had to know what happened to us out there.

We may have traveled as a couple to Vegas, but we left as two individuals with separate paths in life to explore. My new path was that much lonelier due to the experience and the change it brought over me. Iryna refused to discuss our encounter with friends and family, unwilling to invite the type of scorn that usually follows. In private she would attest to every detail I have laid out; however, the social stigma attached to seemingly wild tales of this sort was more than she was willing to tolerate.

We did end up getting married, but not in Las Vegas surprisingly. That strange night in Utah had stolen the magic from our fairy tale wedding celebration, and ultimately served as the initial catalyst to the eventual collapse of our relationship.

My obsession with the paranormal grew in time, creating a barrier between us. I could no longer lead a normal life or settle into the flow my peers had so skillfully managed. I'm not sure if what transpired that fateful night was due to me being chosen, or if we just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. For better or worse I have been forever changed. There was no going back to who I had been before.

I set out to research as much as I could regarding the location where the incident took place. Through various websites I learned that immediately to the south was a paranormal hotspot called Skinwalker Ranch. The Ranch, owned by a billionaire by the name of Robert Bigelow, was rumored to be a secret testing ground for the paranormal.

It was mid-October, 2007, and eight months since my experience with Iryna. Perhaps it was morbid curiosity, divine fate or a spiritual awakening, but I had developed an unquenchable thirst to experience the weirdness boasted by the perpetual lore of Skinwalker Ranch. It was an impulse that consumed me daily. I could no longer look into the mirror or mechanically go about my chores. I had to find an explanation for what had happened to us.

I left my family behind and ventured forth alone on my paranormal quest for answers. I hungered to know what made this location unique. And though I couldn't say with any certainty that the ranch had any connection with our close encounter out there on I-70, it was as good a place as any to start.

In 2007, few people within the paranormal community knew about the ranch. The only clues to its whereabouts were found within the pages of a book by George Knapp and Colm Kellehers titled *Hunt for the Skinwalker*, and an isolated article that appeared in the Utah Deseret News in 1996.

It was the Deseret News article that served to weave the tale of Skinwalker Ranch into the tapestry of mainstream folklore and bring it the status that it enjoys today. It also managed to spark the interest of Robert Bigelow, the billionaire owner of Budget Suite Hotels in Las Vegas. "Mr. Big", as he prefers to be called by those around him, eventually purchased the 480 acre ranch in 1997 from the terror stricken Sherman family. He paid the bargain price of $200,000.

The Deseret News article also gave me the first clues to my exhaustive search for the mysterious ranch. Like a treasure map missing the proverbial "X", the article teases the reader:

> For more than a year now the Shermans' 480-acre ranch just south of Fort Duchesne in Uintah County has been a hotbed for

> UFOs and bizarre paranormal activity—weirdness that even the Shermans, who've witnessed the strange happenings with their own eyes and video camera, have trouble accepting as reality.

The article continues by detailing the high level of strangeness the Sherman's experienced, stating:

> The Shermans have seen three specific types of UFOs repeatedly during the past 15 months - a small boxlike craft with a white light, a 40-foot-long object and a huge ship the size of several football fields. They've seen one craft emit a wavy red ray or light beam as it flies along. They've seen other airborne lights, some of which have emerged from orange, circular doorways that seem to appear in midair. One of the flying lights followed Gwen's car on her way home from work one night. And while out in one of the fields with the family dogs, Terry heard male voices speaking an unfamiliar language. The voices seemed to be about 25 feet above him, but Terry couldn't see a thing. The Shermans have linked the sightings with the death or disappearance of seven of their cows. Four have disappeared without a trace. Three others have been found dead and partially mutilated.

File photo of a calf mutilated out on the ranch

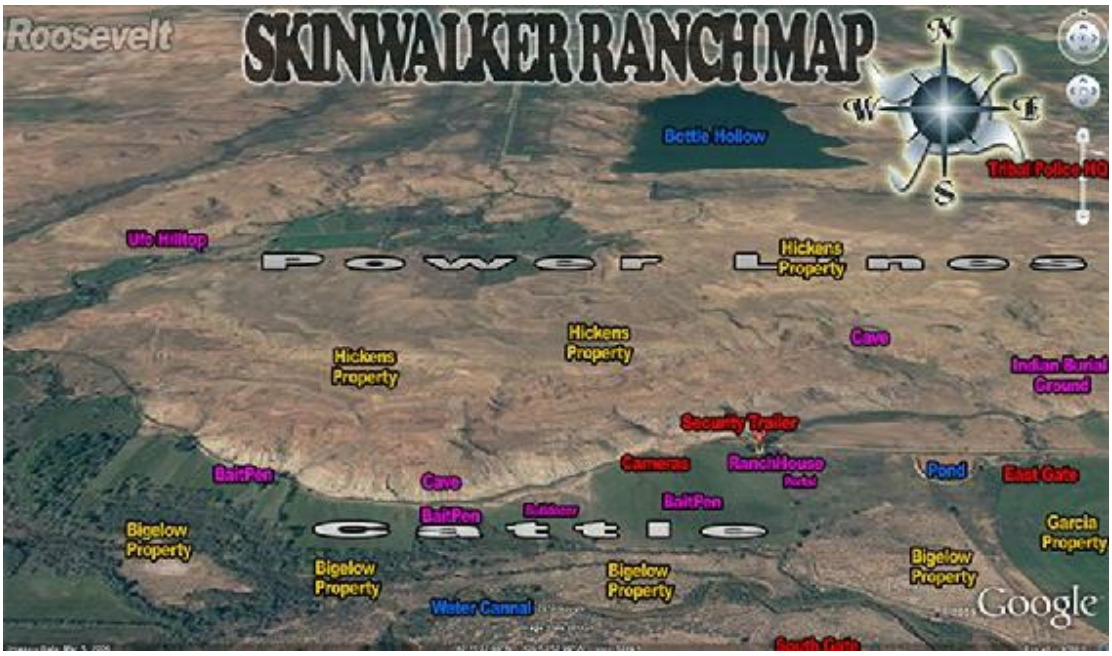
The article captivated my interest, adding to an already insatiable hunger to unlock the secrets hidden beyond the ranch's guarded gates. It gave me hope of one day reuniting with the alien beings I encountered on that Utah desert highway. But to do so I would have to manage access to the Bigelow ranch and get the opportunity to explore its 480 acres.

I packed numerous paranormal accessories for the journey ahead. The array of gadgets included a video camera, laser pointer, thermal gun, night vision monocular, digital audio recorder, EMF meter, headlamp, powerful flashlight, Taser and a map of Fort Duchesne—all stowed away in a single backpack.

Scrawled about the wrinkled and creased map were seemingly arbitrary scribbles and notes, evidence of my failed attempts to pinpoint the elusive ranch. I turned to the website abovetopsecret.com to further clarify my logistics. A few website members living near Fort Duchesne provided me

with speculative directions, building my confidence in the quest that I had planned. Convinced that I was adequately prepared, I set out on my mission appointing myself the title of “Skinwalker Hunter”, the first in a paranormal field I was pioneering.

I awoke at 5:00 Am on the morning of October 14th, weary, bleary eyed, and contrary to the previous’ nights confidence, feeling woefully unprepared for the monumental trip before me. I stuffed the remnants of my paranormal gear into a large army tote and added a blanket, sturdy boots and some warm clothing. My wife and children fast asleep, I softly kissed them goodbye and sped to the bus station. My breath gave life to miniature vaporous clouds as I patiently waited for the bus to arrive and take me to Chicago’s O’Hare Airport. Had I foreseen the adventure awaiting me in the Utah desert, perhaps I would have used this time to reflect on how much my family meant to me—on the value of family in general, rather than prioritize the questions that I chose to pursue.



If I had this map the first time it would have been an easier trip

There at the airport, I hummed a tune to distract my thoughts as I awaited my flight. Absently whistling away, the full realization hit me that I was on my way to fulfilling a childhood dream. I took a moment to fully understand what that meant, conveniently ignoring my somewhat impulsive vacation's itinerary.

The details remained somewhat sketchy. I planned on spending the cold night sleeping in the backseat of a cramped rental car, followed by days baking in the blistering desert sun, and nights aimlessly wandering about a lunar landscape, and ultimately—if successful—having my wits scared senseless by a chance encounter with the unknown. But it was a journey to which I felt predestined. Today I had taken the first steps in pursuit of

universal enlightenment, finally allowing myself to go after the carrot on the stick that has dangled before my eyes for as long as I can remember. And now I was no longer going to ignore it. I was going after the adventure, the mystery, and the suspense.

Seven

Skinwalker hunters

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. If you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.- Friedrich Nietzsche

My cell phone interrupted my whimsical daydream. On the other end was the individual I was waiting to hear from. His name was Ian Borden, a local from the Fort Duchesne area who had recently moved there from Salt Lake City, a purposeful move which had brought him closer to the ranch in his own parallel search for answers.

“Hey man, I’ll be here waiting at the airport when you arrive,” he said in a cheery voice.

Just hearing his voice strengthened my resolve. It was comforting to know that I wouldn’t be walking the path of the dreaded Skinwalker alone. “I look forward to meeting you. Thank you so much for helping me out!” I

replied.

I paused a moment to listen to the monotone voice blaring over the airport intercom: “Flight 2643 leaving to Salt Lake City will be boarding in 10 minutes”.

“Hey man, my flight’s leaving soon. I’ll see you there,” I briefly declared. We said goodbye and ended the call.

Staring out the tiny airplane window at my side, I imagined how similar it must be for an alien to likewise stare out a porthole on a UFO—assuming of course that UFOs have portholes—watching as the tiny ants of humanity scurried below oblivious to the sentient being looking down from the heavens above.

The flight was rather uneventful with a somber landing at the Salt Lake City Airport. Walking to the baggage claim I met with Ian Borden, my paranormal partner for the next few days. He was a young adult, roughly the same age as myself, with short cropped hair and eyes that hinted at a common sense of adventure. Slightly doffing the cowboy hat he wore, he simultaneously extended his hand in a welcoming shake, a broad friendly smile swept across his sun burnt face.

“Welcome to Utah,” he exclaimed. “That’s awesome that you actually came here!”

We exchanged pleasantries and proceeded to the nearby car rental

station to procure my ride. I picked out a compact car, an obnoxious red Cavalier, and in hindsight not the best choice in terms of being inconspicuous or practical. Our mission would best be served by not calling attention to our presence, and no doubt we were in for some treacherous dirt trails once we neared the ranch. I paid the initial charges and set out with Borden in the lead, who was driving a much more practically equipped 4 X 4 SUV. He estimated it to be about a three hour trip from Salt Lake City to Fort Duchesne.

During the ride, we maintained constant communication by walkie-talkie. With tireless fascination I listened to the countless UFO stories that Ian shared with me. He was an excellent storyteller and had an endless volume of personal experiences with UFOs. Just when I was thinking he couldn't possibly add to the chapters of his paranormal odyssey, he would enthrall me with yet another impressive narration. It wasn't long before I was convinced that his life's experiences had corralled him along the same path I was following, a path that was leading directly to the Skinwalker Ranch.

The trip passed quickly. A lopsided, graffiti-filled sign halfheartedly welcomed us to the desolate town of Fort Duchesne, population 600. The majority of its residents were members of the Uintah Tribe. Crossing its borders we had left behind the familiar jurisdiction of what we knew as the United States. We were now visitors in what may as well have been an

independent country governed by natives.

Tribal land has its own set of laws, its own government, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A.) to police them. Once you step foot on tribal land you must abide by a new set of rules established by a tribe that still holds resentment towards the white man for placing them there.

The proud Ute nation once occupied significant portions of eastern Utah, western Colorado, parts of New Mexico and Wyoming. In 1879, due to confrontations with white settlers competing for land, the Ute were coerced to relocate to land that others deemed “undesirable”.

Given my first impressions, it was an apt description for Fort Duchesne. The land was a dry barren desert populated by jagged ridgelines and hilly buttes. Farming and cattle herding was a daily challenge for the tough-as-nails residents who called this charred rock home.

Passing through Duchesne

As I pulled into town I raised my hand to give a casual wave to some locals going about their business. In reply I received little more than a resentful glare. The town is only 7 square miles across and the average family income is well below the national poverty level. The town was initially established as a fort for the United States Army in 1886.

The air felt thick and palpable. A general sense of unease permeated my nervous system. I couldn't shake the notion that something was terribly wrong within the town, but nor could I pinpoint any specific source for the way I was feeling. For all I know it could have been something hiding in the soil below or hovering just out of sight in the sky above, or even something already inside me. Alarm bells were going off in my head; something was definitely wrong here—but what?

We arrived at an unmarked location two miles from the Ranch. Borden had scouted the particular road on previous expeditions and felt it was a tempting spot to begin our hunt. Skinwalker Ranch security was known to patrol the outside perimeter, actively searching for curious bystanders who dared trespass. Years later, a unique set of circumstances presented itself whereby I personally met one of these guards, who at his own peril, shared the inner-workings of Bigelow's security protocols with me. We had reason to fear the fuzz, for according to my source, the guards were combat hardened soldiers. To obtain a position with ranch security, potential

personnel were required to have Top Secret Clearance. These commandos would not take our intruding presence lightly if they were to catch us poking around. Trespassing on or even around the ranch property would result in armed men drawing their guns, followed by physical confrontation and detainment. With no desire to run into security or to have our presence detected, we left behind the comfort of the well-paved road and took to the less than inviting, dusty trail that wound aimlessly across rocky terrain and off into the distance.

I was violently jarred against the car door with each deep rut that grabbed at the tires of my tiny red Cavalier. I navigated the terrain with tedious care afraid of what would happen if it were to get stuck. The sound of weeds slapping against the bottom of the car was unnerving and I struggled to stay to the trail, the car yanked and tossed by the deep ruts and holes carved by years of heavy trucks and thunderstorms. By the looks of it though, the trail had not been used regularly of late. It was a bumpy ride.

I did everything I could to keep up with Ian's more capable vehicle. Just up ahead, I saw his headlights suddenly go dark and his SUV disappeared into the black of the night. Concerned that he had met with an accident or something direr, I stabbed at my walkie-talkies' talk button.

My lips were too close to the mic, muffling my nervous words. "Everything alright? I can't see you," I said sheepishly. His brake lights too

had gone dark.

“Turn off your headlights. You don’t want security to spot us!” warned Borden in a serious voice.

The sun had said its last goodbyes, setting some time ago. The only evidence of life here in the lonesome desert were two headlight beams like eyes peering out into the darkness. “Roger!” I replied to Borden’s warning, using lingo I had heard in dozens of movies. I pushed against the knobby arm of the light switch and the desert sky sprang to life displaying an endless tapestry of stars and far off galaxies.

“Get out your night vision googles,” Borden instructed. “From here on out we go dark.” He sounded overly dramatic as if we were soldiers on a mission stalking a foreign enemy.

In a way that’s exactly what we had set out to do. I took the night vision monocular out from its protective sheath and fixed it to my eye. The dark hidden world outside instantly came into focus. Dried shrubs, crooked trees, dusty boulders, and most rewarding of all, the treacherous trail ahead were all bathed in a thick Technicolor green light. I must have looked like a pirate gazing through his telescope at some far off treasure as I cautiously rolled the car forward with one hand while holding the scope to my eyes with the other.

“Remember! Don’t hit your brakes!” Ian said sounding somewhat

short with me for doing so.

“Roger!” I robotically replied a second time, sounding like a forgetful senior repeating himself.

My car timidly crawled over the bumpy terrain, my foot hovering over the brakes. I decided it best not to hit the gas pedal and allowed the engine to slowly nudge the car forward. A sudden flash of movement across the path caused me to disobey Borden’s warning. I punched the brake pedal like a game show contestant slamming the big red button with the winning answer. As I squinted my eyes, a small stream came into focus running mischievously across my path and threatening to end my paranormal journey. Looking through the scope I saw that Borden had already conquered the stream as was contently motoring down the trail without me.

I dropped the scope and picked up the walkie-talkie. “Hey man, there’s a freakin’ river going across the path here. I’m not sure my little car can…”

He interrupted me in a hurried voice, “You’ve got this. It’s just a small stream and not deep at all. But whatever you do,” he advised, “don’t stop.”

I sat there for a moment, tapping the steering wheel rhythmically with my hand, unsure of my next move. Waiting for my eyes to adjust from the blinding glare of the night vision, I sat idly, trying to decide if I should make

an attempt at the stream. On the upside: I cross without incident and continue on with my journey. On the downside: the car gets stuck and begins to flood; I'm left trapped miles away from the road, trespassing illegally, and without a satisfactory explanation to the rental company for what happened to their car.

"Hurry up," the walkie-talkie sounded, Borden obviously trying to remain polite but with the unmistakable hint of impatience.

Repeating over and over to myself as I willed the car forward, "Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop", I drove into the stream. I immediately was greeted with a loud crunch. It came from just below my feet. The exhaust pipe gave out an awful steely shriek as it was gnashed by a boulder just below the water's surface. I kept the car bullying forward and made it to the other side.

"Dude, that was scary as hell. But I made it!" I said triumphantly. I kept it to myself that my exhaust was probably floating downstream.

"Try to catch up. I can't slow down without hitting my brake lights. We are almost to the spot." There was excitement in his voice.

The rising moon had begun its slow climb into the night sky exposing the nooks and crannies dotting the naked ridgeline that surrounded us with its haunting glow. My walkie-talkie slid to the car floor, tossed there by a large rock which had taken offense at being run over by my front tire. Borden's

voice came up from beneath my feet.

Eight

The robotic voice
And
The disappearing police car

Older and wiser voices can help you find the right path,
If you are only willing to listen.-Jimmy Buffett

"There, just ahead, by that recess in the ridge, that's our spot," He proclaimed.

I coaxed the car off of the dirt path, dodging the claw-like limbs of a withered sage bush that had strategically nestled itself behind an impressively large boulder. Only the car's front end was visible from the trail, like the tip of a forgotten metal spoon sticking out from the sand.

Stepping from his SUV, Ian put one hand on his chin and the other on the back of his neck. With a slow, yet violent twist he produced a sound that

sounded like Rice Crispies complaining about the milk recently poured over them.

“Wow! That road was bad,” he said noticeably relieved.

I nodded my head as if my neck was made of rubber. “Oh my god, was it rough back there. I hope I can make it back out. Do you think we are safe here?” I asked.

“Dunno, safe as any spot, I guess”, he smiled scratching his head.

Ian and I making ourselves at home

“I brought some duct tape. Let’s tape up the reflectors on the car just in case the police or some local rancher drives past,” I said, pleased by my redneck suggestion. After all, with a bit of duct tape you can fix anything.

I began the process of mummifying the reflective surfaces of my car with the tape until I was convinced it blended with the foliage. Of course, my master plan would have been a bit more impressive if the surrounding scenery was itself made up of duct tape and metal rather than trees, sand and sage brush. My car looked like the freshmen float at the high school homecoming. Ian Borden raised an eyebrow and shook his head in amusement.

I yawned and gave a catlike stretch myself as I mentally prepared for the long night ahead. My wristwatch flashed 9:15 at me. I took a deep breath and inhaled the cool desert air. It smelled different than the air in Wisconsin. It had a crisp earthy smell like that of dried grass mixed with wet sand teased with a hint of sun baked cow manure.

“Let’s start setting up,” I suggested to Borden, who was already well into the process of doing so.

I pulled my army tote bag out from the back of my car, the shoulder strap digging into my palm from the weight of its contents. Ian produced two folding chairs and offered one to me.

“Thanks,” I said flippantly as if half expecting the chair.

Sitting down I began to rummage through my bag, my hand blindly groping the contents inside. Feeling the familiar elastic strap of my headlamp I fished it out from the mess inside. Placing it on my forehead made me feel

important, like a spelunker waiting to explore the depths of a forbidden cave. I was once told by a military buddy that they use only red lights when engaged in a night fight. When I asked him why, he told me in a gruff, serious tone, “It’s a military secret, man. I could tell you but then I’d have to kill you.” An uncomfortably long pause followed.

Just some of the gear I brought along

I stared blankly back at him, convinced I no longer wanted to know the answer.

“Nah, I’m just fucking with you man!” he said flashing me an evil grin.

He went on to explain that red light is the most difficult wavelength of light for the human eye to detect because it’s the closest on the spectrum to infrared light which is invisible. From a distance it is nearly invisible to the enemy. With this nugget of sound military advice I clicked the button on my

forehead four times, once more than Dorothy and her ruby slippers. After all, I had no desire at this time to go home. Each push displayed a different intensity of white light until a red hue carpeted the desert floor. Armed with the red light, I now had no need to grope about for the goodies within my bag; I could see them.

We were alone in the desert. The dirt path had led us several miles away from the comforts of humanity, and into what was no doubt “the middle of nowhere”. It was as If we had discovered a land beyond the edges of the known earth, the very fringe of reality. We were unwanted tourists on a land sacred to the local natives, a land upon which they dared not trespass. The name they had for it was foreboding and ominous. They called it “the path of the Skinwalker”.

The lights of Roosevelt, a city 15 miles to the northwest, shining palely off in the distance, were the only signs of human life in any direction we turned. We were well within the land of spirits, of spooks, of wild things, of the hallowed grounds that give rise to unfathomable nightmares.

We had made our way to the edge of hell, the portal to a paranormal land of the bizarre known as “Skinwalker Ranch”.

Ian told me there are those that prefer the name the UFO Farm, and that it kind of depends on personal perspective and perhaps the skin color of the individual. The local whites, unlike the Native American, tend to be

skeptical and to mock the place.

My nightmarish realization of where I stood was interrupted by what sounded like someone barking orders through bullhorn. It came from a nearby hill.

In what I can only describe as a commanding, yet hollow, mechanical-like voice, like a robot squawking through a tin cylinder, someone said what sounded like, “Etah heuta mefratu.”

“What the hell was that!?” I exclaimed towards Burns, my voice hushed.

He stared back at me as if I had the answers.

“Maybe it’s the cops,” I suggested.

As if on cue, red, white and blue lights angrily flashed from behind the hill. The voice continued shouting its robotic commands in a language I couldn’t make out or understand. But then again, the local police there are Native Indians, not the state police. It’s possible they were speaking some tribal dialect.

“Shit! It’s the local native police, the B.I.A. We’re busted!!” I said while eyeballing for possible escape routes. A nearby crevasse in the rocks appeared especially inviting.

The lights began to intensify at a feverous pitch, the voice dishing out its demands in the unknown language.

“I don’t know what were supposed to do, what do they want?” I frantically whispered to Ian.

He shook his head in confused disbelief. We were caught. All my fears had collapsed into this single tense moment, the only road to escape blocked by the barking intruder. Resolved to face the consequences whatever they may be, I shuffled slightly closer to my partner in crime. I thought to myself, “What would my family think? Would I go to jail? How would the cuffs feel against my wrists? What would happen to my car?” All these thoughts began to fill my head like a ghost circling a grave.

Then without warning, as suddenly as the lights had appeared they abruptly shut off. The metallic voice had gone mute, no engine idled, and thank God—no footsteps. Nothing, just stoic silence and the night’s cool desert air. The brief rustling of a falling leaf made a noise as a light breeze whispered through. Goose bumps raised along my skin like a rash refused to surrender their vigilance.

We sat in silence, neither daring to make a noise, unsure of our next move. After a few minutes I spoke up. “If that was the police, why haven’t they arrested us yet?”

“I have absolutely no idea what that was,” Ryan said shaking his head side to side like a waiter holding up an invisible plate in each hand as if trying to pass them off as real.

Somewhat resigned, I said, “Well, there’s no way of getting out of this. They’ve blocked the road going back, so we might as well see what they want.”

“Yah,” he replied cautiously eyeing the path back.

“Let’s do this,” I nodded with some conviction and gave my headlamp two more forceful clicks. A dim white light replaced the red beam. The light fell on my new hiking boots, now covered in a fine layer of desert dust. We set out to scale the nearby hill, shambling up the embankment slowly like two escaped prisoners determined to turn ourselves over to the waiting authorities.

Once we reached the top I pointed my headlamp out ahead of us hoping to illuminate whoever awaited there on the other side. I fully expected a light to respond to mine, like two warships communicating on the dark sea with blinking spotlights.

The anticipated light never came. Perhaps they were hiding, waiting to sneak up and tackle us. Maybe this wasn’t the B.I.A. Maybe it was the ranch guards barking orders in some secret military lingo, and not the local police after all.

Ian began to methodically sweep the area with his own flashlight.

“Hello?” I called out, my voice a higher pitch than I had intended. There was no reply.

Ian nervously pointed his flashlight about in quick jerking motions as if playing a game of laser tag.

“I don’t see anything, do you?” I softly asked in a breathy tone.

“I don’t think there is anyone one else out here,” he whispered in reply.

“Look for tracks!” I suggested. “There’s got to be…” I didn’t get the chance to finish my sentence.

“Already on it, man. There’s nothing.” He kept his voice to a whisper.

Like Sherlock Holmes with his oversized magnifying glass scrutinizing a murder scene for clues, we scanned the ground for any disturbances and found none.

“There isn’t even tire tracks here!” I said surprised, more so to myself than to Ian.

“Ya, I know. I can’t even find a damn footprint,” he said, taking his hat off and rubbing the back of his head in frustration.

“You don’t find it odd, not finding any prints or tire tracks, nothing?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “It’s definitely odd. I would have sworn that the lights and voices were coming from right over here. But keep in mind, things can get spun around here pretty easy. There’s nothing to contain the sound, and

sometimes what we think is right here is actually bouncing off distant rocks and shit."

"Okay," I agreed. "But those lights seemed pretty dam close if you ask me. I mean, there's only one way in here and one way out. If it was a vehicle, it was right here."

Ian only nodded and shrugged.

Defeated we returned to the camp.

I let some time pass, sipping water from a plastic bottle and taking small bites from a nutrition bar. It wasn't the best dinner, but it was doing the trick.

"So what the hell do you think that was?" I asked Ian, hoping that after thinking on it for while he'd be able to offer up some speculation.

"Best guess? That was our first experience with the ranch," he said with no small hint of glee and kicking a small rock out of the way for emphasis.

I was excited and started rummaging through my army bag for my video camera. "Whatever's out here knows we are here. It's messing with us". I paused before continuing. "You know, on the way out here my biggest fear was that I would get arrested." I looked directly at Ian. "Do you think that whatever it was, it was reading my mind?"

I remember reading that Navajo Indians considered the Skinwalker to

be a “trickster”, neither a good nor evil entity. Doing my best imitation of a leprechaun, but keeping my voice cautiously hushed, I said, “Quite a tricky little guy is he.” I snickered to myself at my comedic attempt to ease the moment’s tension, but it did little to shake the sense of dread which had crept over me, setting my nerves on edge and widening my eyes. I’m sure I must have looked like some tree owl as my eyes darted in the direction of the merest hint of sound or the slightest stir of movement.

I found myself pacing nervously around the perimeter of the enclosing dark, trying to peer out through the black shroud which hung around us. No longer the predator, I had become the prey. The fearless “Skinwalker Hunter” who had set out to slay the dragon was gone, replaced by a frightened boy armed only with his sword made of paper and still afraid of the dark. I was nothing more than a rabbit leaping about and oblivious to the unseen wolf which stalked me from the shadows beyond.

To take my mind off of things, I occupied myself with some mundane tasks like making the site look more like a camp, organizing my meager supplies, and making the car as comfortable as possible for a night’s sleep—a concern Ian didn’t have. Ian and I didn’t do all that much in the way of talking.

Maybe an hour had gone by when all of a sudden things started getting weird.

Nine

Paranormal power lines

What is a soul? It's like electricity - we don't really know what it is,
But it's a force that can light a room.-Ray Charles

There was this massive set of power lines about a quarter a mile from our campsite which we had seen but paid little notice. They suddenly started to produce an eerie sound which filled the night sky. It was awful. It was like the loud chatter of voices in a crowded train station crashing against the rocky walls behind us and echoing down the valley floors. We heard a sharp electrical buzz which overshadowed a metallic clang. It sounded like a legion of demons had dropped their swords at the sight of the approaching army of winged angles. It was a near maddening crescendo of chaos that repeated itself again and again.

“Oh my god, what is that?” I screamed over the deafening noise.

“The power lines,” said Ian, his sunburnt face turning a sickly shade of white. My eyes followed his raised arm, his finger extended and repeatedly stabbing in the direction of the power lines. “It’s coming from over there!”

I saw two massive angular towers from which the lines were suspended. Craning my neck upwards to take in the full view, I couldn’t help thinking they looked like a futuristic version of the Great Pyramids of Giza, both timeless and imposing. Unlike the Great Pyramids of Giza, however, these metallic monstrosities were starting to glow! The power lines themselves illuminated the desert floor casting over it a carpet of phantom light and scattering shadows among the surrounding shrubs. Free from their prisons of bark and trunk, the shadows came alive in the pulsating glow, dancing like savages about the desert floor. Over our heads, the power lines continued to chant and hum, intensifying in tempo and rhythm. The dancing shadows crashed about spasmodically and erratically as if entranced. The power lines continued to bicker and chatter.

These are the paranormal power lines

“Holy crap, this is really happening,” I shouted, fumbling with my video camera like a juggler with one too many balls in the air. My heartbeat matched the rhythmic buzz of the power lines. I pushed the camera’s record button, my eyes glued to the viewfinder in giddy fascination. Displayed on the tiny screen was a blurry orange glow enveloped in a fog of darkness. My eyes squinted for more detail.

“It’s not showing up so well on the camera,” I said frustrated, but refusing to turn away from the condensed horror movie playing on my screen.

“Looks pretty amazing on my night vision,” crowed Borden.

I stole a glance at my companion momentarily diverting my eyes and immediately felt the shame of having violated a key rule in my unwritten

Skinwalker Hunter Handbook. I'm pretty sure it would have been rule #21: Never take your eyes off of a paranormal target while an event is manifesting, lest it disappear. You have but seconds to capture the singular event; don't waste it—followed by the word "dummy" as an exclamation mark. I made a mental note of this imaginary rule, found in my equally imaginary field guide. Perhaps one day I would add it to a book.

Ian Borden was hunkered down with one knee behind him and the other bent forward. He was supporting his night vision scope. He looked like Davy Crocket gazing out into the unexplored wilderness.

I looked back at the power lines. "Just great!" I growled, my lips curled back in an angry snarl. The glow was now gone. The ghastly orchestra of noise had also ceased, leaving us alone in the quiet desert, or at least as alone as our human senses could tell.

I immediately scrambled for the video playback option and pushed the button. An indistinct orange blob flashed on the screen for a few painful seconds. My heart sunk to my stomach and continued to descend until becoming wedged somewhere deep within my intestines. The evidence of paranormal activity that I desperately wanted had slipped through my fingers like a ghost through a chamber wall. The Trickster, true to his name, had tricked us again.

Ten

Blue fire flies

O what is life, if we must hold it thus as wind-blown sparks hold momentary fire?

-Ada Cambridge

We spent the next few hours planted in the fabric of our folding chairs. We smoked cigarettes, told jokes and talked about girls to pass the time; but not for a moment did we dare let down our guards. I nervously tapped on my cigarette, each attack of my finger creating a tiny shower of sparks. The mixture of ash and spark fell unceremoniously to the ground. From the corner of my eye I noticed an unimaginably small flicker of light had erupted from the sandy floor. It rose up for an instant and then winked out. Then there was another and another, and yet another, until the entire ground was raining energy in the wrong direction. I would almost swear it was the ashes themselves coming back to life, igniting like tiny embers, and

lifting back in to the air.

I popped off my chair hollering, “Can you see that? Can you see that?” I pranced about in excitement.

Ian, smiling ear to ear, slowly rose from his chair. “Yeah, it’s really hard to see; but yeah, weird. Whatever it looks like, it’s coming up off of the ground”.

We immediately donned our gear to analyze this unexpected, but intriguing phenomenon—Ryan with his night vision scope and me with my video camera.

“Hey, good news!” Borden started. “I can see…”

But I interrupted him before he could finish. “Well, I got bad news. I can’t see a damn thing on the camera, absolutely nothing.” I alternated looking through the viewfinder and then back at the animated scene before me, a game of peek-a-boo between camera and light that repeated itself several times, before admitting defeat. “I can barely see it with my eyes. How’s it look with the scope?”

“It’s not clear, but yah—I can definitely see it. It looks like tiny droplets of energy,” he said, waving his scope around like the nose of a bloodhound trying to pick up the scent.

The sparkling pixie dust rising from the ground did not disappear like the previous haunts had. Massaging my eyes with my palms caused

additional sprites to appear. These were much brighter. Tiny stars momentarily joined with the dimmer pixies like lost lovers dancing in each other's arms. The stars vanished seconds later leaving the pixies to dance alone.

"We must be hallucinating!" I concluded.

We had to be hallucinating, I was sure of it. I wondered to myself if the simple rub of my eyes could summon illusionary stars, what other monstrosities were hiding in my head? Shit was so weird I didn't know if could trust my eyes or my mind any longer. I had to quell whispering thoughts of insanity. It was as if a vast chasm burrowed itself deep within my psyche. A feud had broken out between what my eyes were seeing and what my mind was telling me. I was desperate to internalize the night's affairs into some logical, orderly fashion. Perhaps I could accept that the glowing power lines were the result of a power station malfunction. Overloaded circuits had ignited the lines and caused an intense plasmatic fire.

But no sooner had I put this particular topic to rest, an imaginary devil perched itself on my shoulder. His red hands teased his greasy black mustache into a bit of a spike; he fingered his pitchfork with admiration. He leaned in toward my ear, and haughtily whispered, "Hey Ryan, what about the ground lights? Were those from overheated wires, too? What about these lights you're seeing right now, smart guy? You see any tiny wires down

here? I know I don’t. ”

I ignored his presence and confidently concluded that the energetic sprites were nothing more than the photo receptors in our eyes working overtime, the strain of staring into the inky blackness for that one photon of light.

I looked again through the night vision scope and could clearly see the same illusionary effect. Tiny pixels of light scrambled wildly about the green backdrop, colliding with and intensifying the merest hint of light found.

“Rubbing my eyes causes the same effect,” I internalized to my imaginary devilish doubter.

The impish voice was not convinced, and with a smug grin splitting his blood-red face, he asked, “What about that mechanical voice and the lightshow over the hill?” He played with his oily beard as I fumbled for an answer. I was playing for time, waiting for the proverbial angel to alight upon my opposite shoulder. But to the contrary, it was a second devil. Slapping his knee and laughing, he said, “Now you’re getting it! Welcome to Skinwalker Ranch, Mr. Skinner.” A bead of sweat wound its way down my forehead, followed the lines of a deep wrinkle, tickled past my ear and then fell straight to the ground to join my sanity in a wet, messy pile

As the night wore on, we became accustomed to seeing these dimly lit desert lights. The phenomena looked like electrified mist hanging in the air.

I spoke up first. “Maybe those are fireflies. Back in Wisconsin I see them in the summer”.

Borden laughed, almost mockingly. “You see BLUE fireflies?”

He had a point. “Hmmm, the only fireflies I have ever seen are kind of yellow, maybe white.”

“That reminds me of a story,” he said.

As I have already said, this was a guy who had a knack for narration. Eager to listen, I sat on the ground and wiggled my butt vigorously to shovel away a few painful pebbles. Satisfied I was in a good position, I folded my legs Indian style and propped my chin with both palms. Ian stood over me, his headlamp shining down into my eyes, the starburst effect slightly blinding me.

“My grandfather was out working on his farm one day,” he started. “He was working later than usual and the night snuck up on him. Finished for the day, he was in the process of putting his equipment away into a shed when he noticed a small blue ball of light off in his fields. He said it was about the size of a baseball. Well this ball of light began moving around erratically, and eventually circled him as if my grandfather was a source of great curiosity. Whatever it was—it was no insect, my grandfather said that it moved with a purpose. There was an intelligence about it. The light pulsated and darted about and eventually moved in for a closer

examination."

"Oh yeah?" I interrupted. It was the excitement of the moment. "What did your grandfather do? What happened next?!" I could imagine myself in that same field, alone, maybe a little scared and unsure of what to do.

"Well, he gripped his shovel, slowly looked up at the light which was now about an arm's length away, and WHACK! He flattened it against the wall of the shed."

"No way!" I shouted. Gasping laughter like hiccups erupted from me.

"Yeah, and not only that but then he took the shovel and smeared whatever it was down the shed wall!" said Borden his arms moving down in a slow chopping motion.

I burst out laughing again, a brash sound starkly out of place in the heavy silence of the desert surrounding us. "We sure could use someone as tough as your grandfather out here right now," I said grinning.

We both nodded in hushed silence.

An invading army of wispy clouds marched in from the south covering the moon like a blanket tossed over a lampshade. A dog howled a long lonely protest at the lunar absence. Somewhere in the direction of Skinwalker Ranch a pack of coyotes answered with a merry chorus of yelps and howls.

Eleven

Trespassing

There are three kinds of men. The one that learns by reading.

The few who learn by observation.

The rest of them have to pee on the electric fence for themselves.-Will Rogers

"I'm going to the power lines to investigate," I announced determined to see who or what had caused the lightshow.

"If go, you will be trespassing," Borden warned. "The guards patrol that entire area with police dogs."

The dog barking at the moon a few moments ago echoed through my mind, a solemn reminder to his warning. "Let's head over there…at least just to the border," I tendered.

Between here and there stood a hill, and not just any ordinary old hill. No, not like the ones I would sled down on a snowy winter eve in

Wisconsin. This particular hill though not overly tall but steep had broken boulders randomly strewn across its otherwise smooth surface. It kind of reminded me of the pimples on a teenager's face, or the snaggle-toothed smile of an otherwise pretty girl.

This hill—if you could even call it that—now stood between me and the power lines. We scurried up its steep rocky embankment. I lost my footing more than a few times on the lose rocks that rolled beneath my steps. Slowly we made our way up the slope and in the direction of the Ranch. We had to use our hands to pull ourselves up to the top. I hoisted myself up to the crest and found myself on relatively flat ground. Feeling accomplished, I slapped the dust off of my coat as if the dust itself were a living creature. Satisfied I had removed the infestation, I continued my hike. Sagebrush dominated the desert landscape, their spiked silvery leaves grabbing at my pant legs as if warning me to turn back. The red amber glow of my headlamp offered several paths through the sagebrush maze and to the imposing electric tower in the distance. Taller and taller it rose the closer we came.

The tower stood over us like a metal giant its batteries long having lost their charge, its brooding presence leaving us in a dazed awe.

Ian broke the silence. "That fence," he said, pointing to something in the distance, "is where Bigelow's property starts."

Following Borden's extended finger I made out a rickety pile of wood

and a tangled mess of wire fencing. Sewn to each of the weathered posts were three strands of barbed wire each suspended at varied heights and running parallel. The fence trailed across the desert landscape until swallowed by the distant darkness.

A sharp electric “hum” startled us from somewhere above as if the metal giant was stirring. We smartly looked up at the tower half expecting to be struck dead by lighting raining down. The hum continued, yet the lines failed to ignite. Zeus stayed his hand. There would be no bolt of lightning let loose from Olympus this night. It was nothing more than an ordinary power line humming a tune only an electrician’s ears could appreciate.

A rusted metal sign attached by a strand of wire to the fence and rattled by the passing wind caught our attention. We could barely make out what it said: NO TRESPASSING. It had been sandblasted by years of exposure to the desert, scraping away the letters and leaving behind little more than a metallic plate. I stretched out my arm reaching for the fence determined to give it a good hard shake.

The fence surrounding the ranch

Borden spoke up. “I wouldn’t touch it, could be electrified”.

Ignoring his advice I grabbed the wire with two balled up fists. I instantly clenched my bared teeth and flopped around wildly like an inflatable character dancing spastically at some used car dealer’s sales event, and right next to a sign that read: Deal of the Week. Fried Dope on a Fence.

Borden’s eyes lit up and both of his hands raced to the top of his head as if it were on fire.

“The fence is fine!” I shouted, “I’M KIDDING!!” I said doubling over with laughter.

Shaking his head slightly in dismay, he asked, “What should we do next?”

“I didn’t come all the way to Utah to turn around now,” I responded

rather coldly.

“If we go over that fence we may not come back, and I’m not talking about just the guards,” said Borden.

My desire to pull back the thin veil separating this world from the next compelled me forward. I took another strong hold of the fence, the metal wire vibrating buoyantly in my hands. “Screw the consequences,” I said brazenly. “I’m leaping the fence!”

I was born to break the rules. At a young age smoking candy cigarettes and hiding in McDonald’s Ham burglar’s prison felt good. My parents should have shown more concern.

Borden clutched his night scope tightly, picking at it absentmindedly as if deep in thought. Without looking back I clamored over the barbed fence in a half-hitching vault. The metal thorns of the barbwire instantly dug into my sleeve with an audible rip. I pin-wheeled my right leg over the fence where it landed firmly onto another set of barbed guards. I gave a low guttural howl as several razor-like shards punctured the flesh of my thigh. This wasn’t working. My cavalier city-boy attitude was a joke, nothing more than a silly display, really.

In my tangled position I looked like a Kung-Fu style kick gone terribly wrong. I was unable to free myself and afraid to move. I was a fly caught in a metal web, waiting for some hairy, eight-eyed monster from the

netherworld to come scuttling down from the tower and sink its dagger-sized fangs into my twitching body.

Each ill-advised attempt to free myself only further served to make matters worse intertwining me with the fence as one. Looking down at my leg I could make out as the tattered cloth flipped over and back in the breeze the bloodied flesh of the wound beneath.

“I could sure use some help here!” I said pleading, my free leg going up and down.

“It typically takes two people to get over these fences,” said Borden as he meticulously freed me from my entrapment.

I examined my damaged attire in disgust, pissed for impulsively jumping the fence, a skill which apparently takes some degree of country-bred finesse that I lacked.

Borden approached the fence line with confidence and placed his right foot firmly on the lower wire, and using both hands grasped the barbed wire above it and lifted. A brief grunt escaped his lips as he held the wire aloft, his arms shaking like a fisherman battling with his catch. A two foot space had been opened between the wires, barely enough for me to safely crawl through. I poked my upper body into the space as cautiously as I could, slipped through and ungracefully dumped myself on to the other side like a pile of dirty laundry.

“I made it!” I shouted triumphantly. “Now it’s your turn.” I gestured him forward with a wiggling finger.

I dusted myself off, and manhandled the fence with a solid stomp of my boot. With a clumsy upward jerk the battered wires released with a series of binding groans.

“I’m not coming over,” Burns announced flatly.

“What?!” I cried in surprise.

“It’s just not worth it, man. Besides, haven’t we seen enough already? I mean do we really need to go to jail, or worse risk our lives? And for what?” He turned his back to me.

“Don’t you want to see what the ranch is all about? Isn’t that worth the risk?” I insisted.

“No man, not for me. You go on if you want. Here, take this.” He dug something out of his pocket and gave it a relaxed underhanded pitch over the fence. Something heavy landed beside me scattering a few pebbles, a small plume of dust descended on my boot. “It’s the walkie-talkie, you know, so we can stay in contact.”

I glanced down at the walkie-talkie which was half buried in the sand. It had the foreboding look of a miniature grave stone.

“Keep me updated. I’ll be right here.” He was fidgeting with the radio he held. “Push this button if you get into any trouble,” he said. “It will sound

an alarm if you get into any trouble.”

As I shuffled off towards the tower I couldn’t help thinking that he never did explain what he would actually do should I get into any trouble. There was no Calvary to come to my rescue should things go terribly sideways. The walkie-talkie he gave me was as dead and useless to me as the lifeless plastic and circuits housed inside. I swallowed hard against the knot stuck in my throat and continued walking. I would have to go this part alone.

Twelve

Something is coming

Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.

-Helen Keller

I defiantly kicked a large ant pile which stood in my way. A big no-no in native folklore. It may have looked like a simple pile of dirt, but to those who believed such things these were the fabled home of the “little people”, a race of pigmy-like Indians who spoke an unknown language, foreign even to the local tribal elders. Elf-like entities, they stood no more than 3 feet tall and were armed with poisonous arrows to ward off their taller native counterparts. The story goes that these seemingly arbitrary mounds of dirt were actually the tops of their burrowed homes. It was considered bad luck to trifle with them. The desert gods play awful tricks in retribution for a weary traveler’s insolence.

Before I had time to right my outstretched foot, a malevolent gust of wind coughed the entire brown mess back into my face. Spitting out grains of sand, seeds and other desert toiletry, I looked to the stars and cursed. “Why me? What the hell is wrong with me? Why am I doing this to myself? What am I doing here?”

The heavenly gods above and demonic beasts resting in the bowels below offered no concession to my pleas. I trudged on alone more irritated than frightened. The hum of the approaching lines gradually increased until it was a deafening roar of static haze, buzzing like a thousand mad hornets in an electric nest above me. I cowered below the Great Power Lines, a sullen meditative stance. No impish demons paraded along the lines setting them ablaze as they skated down its hellishly lit path. Whatever nightmarish party had occurred hours ago had ceased. The lights were off and the hosts soundly in bed preparing for an early hangover. The tricksters had drank a bitter cocktail of our fear mixed with a splash of madness. They greedily devoured our suffering and were drunk on our pain.

“See anything yet?” my radio crackled. I jerked away instinctively as if it were a hot coal. Pressing the device hard against my mouth I felt my lips indent into the microphone’s tiny holes. Afraid the lines themselves were listening, I cupped the walkie-talkie close and whispered, “No, uh-uh, nothing’s happening here…” A few moments later I awkwardly announced,

“Over”. I wanted to impress Borden, to sound like a seasoned desert commando, or a secret agent; but in reality I sounded more like a stuttering redneck trucker who’s had one too many.

“Wait,” I said sharply. My eyes darted about wildly trying to focus on the slightest of movement. “I think I see something,” my voice pausing and rising with each syllable.

A ray of ghostly white light crept over a distant ridge. There was something about it that immediately made me feel unsteady, almost like the lightheaded dizziness you feel when you stand suddenly and it takes a second for the blood to catch up. Only I was already standing. “Something is coming,” I managed to say, my chest pumping with short gasps of air.

At that very moment a deeply entrenched primal instinct wrestled away control of my body from me, the same instinct our ancestors may have relied on whilst hiding in the bushes as the thundering footsteps of a wooly mammoth approached. I slid my arm slowly, thoughtfully, to my jacket pocket to retrieve my camera, the only available weapon in my arsenal with which to hunt this formidable foe—an alien intelligence which lurked beyond the grave, beyond the stars and beyond the inner recesses of a subconscious mind.

I can’t say how I knew this, but the light had its own predatory instincts and purpose as it crested the hill. It was burning with a white, hot

light, different than the glowing spheres that Iryna and I had seen along the highway. I perceived its menacing aura and knew it to be a threat. It made a direct beeline towards me like a heat seeking missile locked onto its target. A few rough valleys and spiny hills stood between me and it.

“I have time,” I repeated calmly to myself.

I had time to arm my camera and pump off a few photographic shots to slay the camera-shy-beast. The light, undeterred, appeared to acknowledge my exact location continuing to effortlessly glide ever nearer. I fumbled with my camera, fidgeting with the case. I spun and twirled it about like a misaligned Rubik Cube.

“Where the hell was the damn button?” I spat. “Why can’t I ever be prepared when this happens?” The words come out in hot angry breaths.

How could anyone be prepared to hunt a demon, a god, an inter-dimensional pest from a place I had only read about in books, the endings of which were now lost to me?

I swallowed large gasps of air which filled my stomach but did little to ease my nerves. I held up the camera steadying it like a hunter would his rifle. The light had its own sights locked dead on me, its crosshairs zeroed in on its human prey. As if there was some unspoken mental link between it and me, I feared time was running out for me. I truly believed I was in danger. Whatever this thing was, it was coming in fast. I held my breath and winked

one eye shut as my finger caressed the picture button like a hunter itching the metal of the gun's trigger.

The paranormal ball of light

But the ball of light had gotten off the first shot. A torrential wave of fear blasted through my body shaking the very core of my being as if I had been shot by a bullet of emotion instead of hot lead. A shockwave screaming of self-preservation reverberated through my body overriding every wandering thought in my conscious mind. My sub-consciousness graciously took over my now pilotless physical and mental controls.

Whatever it was had hit me, and it hit me hard. My knees knocked and buckled under the weight of an alien emotional sensation, nothing like I had ever felt before. Fear and sadness wracked through my body, rerouted my neurons and smothered my soul. The camera, the mission, Oh! The wonderful, glorious mission of capturing a Skinwalker on camera vanished

from my vision like wisp of smoke in a gust of wind.

I barely heard Borden's voice as he repeated, "Are you ok…? Ryan, talk to me. Are you ok…? What's going on?" over and over and over from my radio.

I turned to run. I knew this would be like no run I had ever experienced before. I would be running for my life. I sprung from the ground, leaving behind an explosion of dust. Moments later the ball of light punched a cylindrical silhouette through its grainy curtain. Running in long outstretched strides I began stabbing at every button on my walkie-talkie in panicked hope that one would transmit the emergency alert to Borden. What was it he had said? Push which button and hold it how long? None of that really mattered now as I galloped across the crater-filled desert. The light in hot pursuit, never wavering, never wandering. It knew where I was and it wanted me. That much I knew—not in words, not in any language. But I knew it like I knew my own name. Whatever beam it had shot me with had told me so in words I could never explain. If I should stop to catch my breath, it would be my last. I had to keep running for all I was worth if I wanted to escape the hellish nightmare burning behind me.

I heard brief "blurts" and "beeps" and "squeals" coming from my radio. I paid little attention as the sound of my breath bellowed deafeningly between my ears. A sudden painful and awful realization stuck me like a bass

cord strum on a guitar: I STILL HAD MY LIGHT ON. My stupid red light illuminated my racing footsteps, the same red light that no human eye could see.

"You idiot, Ryan!" I screamed in my head. "How could you be so freakin' stupid!?"

The military advice I followed earlier didn't apply to an entity which could see in all spectrums of light and possibly in dimensional spectrums we don't know exist. Snuffing the light out deep into the folds of my pocket, I snapped my head backwards. The light for the first time appeared disorientated. It paused! The light—a sphere of bubbling white hot plasma—made clumsy weaving and bobbing motions searching for me as if I had suddenly blipped off its radar.

This was the break I was waiting for and I wouldn't get a second. In a mad dash I scrambled down a rocky hill, my camera and gear smashing against its craggy walls. At the bottom I could see the fence line approaching in the distance, the false safety of another human doing little to lift my spirits. I heard pieces of my camera littering the desert floor between each gasping pant. In the distance where I hoped to find Ian Borden a small light pierced the inky darkness. I assumed it had to be Borden flashing his flashlight so I knew which part of the fence would lead me to safety. Safety! As if such a term existed within the Luciferian context of this godforsaken place. For all I

knew the earth itself could swallow a man whole, and I was next on the menu. Whatever damage the light had done, it had found its mark and made a lethal hit to my psyche.

Borden's blinking light made me hesitate. Lights, lights, lights in a dark desert miles from no one. I trusted no light. I trusted only the dark shadows which offered me a place to hide.

"I'm over here!" shouted Borden, the words coming both over my radio and over my head. "Can you see my light? Come to the light!" he said, his voice thinning eerily in the distance between us.

What a bizarre thing to say, I mused. Had I died and didn't know it yet? If so Borden must have been the first to kick the bucket and this was game over for me as he beckoned me towards the light in some very lucid vision of the afterlife.

I was beyond the point of rational thought. Whatever the light had done to me, it had altered me, sinking me into a perpetual state of irrational thoughts and images. Tears welled up in my eyes as I changed course away from the safety of Borden and his light. I dove under a nearby bush like I child hiding under his mother's dress. I dared not come out. Like a desert rodent I had found my burrow and was content to spend the night there. I wrapped my arms around the base of the bush and tucked my legs in close to my chest.

The incessant radio suddenly blared, “What did you-?” I twisted the knob to off.

The light was out there, still searching for me. It could smell my fear and hear my heartbeat. The last thing I needed was a noisy radio giving away my hiding place. I’m alive. The light won’t find me here, I assured myself, as I squirreled tightly around the bush. In a lopsided motion the ball of light wobbled back and forth before plunging toward the ground. It disappeared into the earth.

The nearby echoes of Borden’s voice filled the air. He was yelling something. Whatever he was saying I didn’t quite understand, nor did I care to. I was safe, I was alive, and oh, brother! I was filthy.

Surveying myself I noticed two brown bricks wiggled where my boots had once been. A layer of thick dust covered my face and reddened my eyes, and a dismal outcropping of leaves and twigs had grown from my tussled hair. A few minutes passed and the demonic light never showed.

I cautiously popped me head out of the bush like a chipmunk from its hole to see if the stalking cat had left. I twisted my radio’s knob back on, leaving the volume on the lowest setting. “I’m coming back,” I said into the radio in a voice I didn’t recognize, a voice that had been stripped of all confidence and humanity, a voice that was raw with emotion, sharp and foreign. It was the voice of a victim of some catastrophic act of nature, a

tornado victim perhaps, crawling from beneath the twisted rubble of his home to see the devastated aftermath of the world which bleakly greeted him. I gathered what remained of my belongings. A mess of frayed wires and broken plastic dangled from my pockets as I started a brisk creeping shuffle towards Borden's beckoning light.

"Ryan, are you out there?" I heard a cautious leery voice whisper.

He told me later that his first urge as he saw me emerge from the darkness was to run. He didn't recognize me as I staggered towards him like a zombie that had clawed its way out of some shallow grave. My pants were a frayed and tattered mess, my hair a twisted knot of twigs and leaves, and my face even from a distance ashen, sullen, and covered with dirt. Only my piercing eyes recognizable through this desert garb I shamefully wore kept him from running off.

"You looked like some ghoulish phantom of the night hobbling towards the light," he had said.

When I did reach him, he had already backed away from the fence and seemed none too eager to attend to the wire and let me through. A look of caution crossed his suspect face. "Ryan?" he repeated, as if questioning his own eyes.

The question seemed to linger in the air fueling an uncomfortable silence.

I grunted a reply. “Yah, it’s me. I think I’m in shock. Are you going to let me through?”

“Oh, sorry! Yah, here, hurry up,” he said tugging at the fence.

I squatted like crab and scuttled across the spread wires. The barbed tips combed my hair, removing a few lose twigs. I righted myself and turned to face Borden, who was scrutinizing me intently, his eyes burning holes into me. I had trouble standing as the final delirious stages of adrenaline intoxication ebbed away. My legs became trembling sticks on top of which perched a skull that bobbled aimlessly. My arms were mere tubes of jelly; my stomach squeezed and clenched threatening to spill its contents; and my teeth chattered like an over-wound toy. A hand reached out to steady me.

“What the heck happened out there?” he demanded.

“I don’t know. Something attacked me. I was so close to catching it on video this time,” I replied defeated. My eyes wandered around lifelessly in their sockets searching for the shattered remains of my camera.

“Look at my camera! God damn it, it’s ruined!” I said throwing in a long litany of incoherent curses and words of anger not found in the pages of any Dirty Word Dictionary, enough to make Hugh Hefner himself blush at my caca inspired discourse. “Clucking, clacking, momma flap-jacking. I paid $400 for that damned thing”.

“Count your losses, at least you made it back here in one piece,” said

Borden, doing little to quell my frustration.

But he was right; he typically was. I had survived but at what cost? The awful clarity of the night's events were forever embedded deep within my memory, waking me on moonlit nights with terrible dreams of running alone through the desert, pursued by unknown terrors, my legs lumbering through endless seas of mud as tentacles of light slither around my neck and drag me into the earth. The dreams were always the same: unforgiving, unending and unrelenting in their torment.

I admit, however, that I had experienced recurring nightmares long before I had ever heard of the infamous Skinwalker Ranch, before I had met Iryna, before we had set out for Las Vegas. In this dream, I stand before a grand wolf, its eyes ablaze with a disturbing fire, burning eyes which pierce deep into my soul like a sharp knife. A tribal member, his eyes wide and his face wooden and stern, once warned me, "Never look directly into the eyes of a Skinwalker. If you should be so foolish my friend, the Skinwalker will take possession of your soul!"

In the dream, the wolf looks at me in such a way no illusion should. It sees me, not the dream version of me, it sees ME. When I awake, my soul resonates with fear as if aware of some terrible secret on a level which thankfully escapes my conscious mind. On these nights, I awake in pools of my own perspiration, the image of the wolf a haunting photograph refusing to

slip away like dreams tend to do.

I had no way of knowing at this time that in the year to come I would be face-to-face with the same nightmarish wolf that haunted my childhood dreams. The series of events thus far chronicled only the portent of future horrors to come. A personal meeting with the Skinwalker himself had already been arranged.

Thirteen

Home in Wisconsin…but not alone

Guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days.-Benjamin Franklin

I returned to the safety of my home in Wisconsin. It was an upscale house buried deep in the country and fifteen miles from the nearest city. My property was surrounded by farmland and woods with deer and turkey as my nearest neighbors. I was safe and I was home. However, it wasn't long before I discovered that all that isolation did little to shield me from the influences of the Ranch and its host of nightmarish characters.

It was mid-May, and I was sharing the house with an overweight bag of loose fur, also known as a cat. No matter how high I drop this potato-with-a-tail, he always manages to land on his feet with the grace of an Olympic gymnast. It's like magic, and better yet he can perform this trick forever! Or at least until he becomes sick of being so rudely dropped. When he gets to

that point he lets me know with a noticeable kick of his back leg into my waist. He then squeezes out a labored whine like a fire engine's whistle and springs from my hip, zipping across the kitchen floor like an orange pillow on a skateboard, gliding to a halt at the gluttonous safety of his food bowl.

As for my wife Iryna, she had moved out. My feverish obsession for the paranormal had disfigured me in her eyes. I was no longer the same simple man she had married.

I acknowledge that the female mind can at times be beyond man's comprehension. They're godlike in their ability to sense the presence of another woman. It's a unique gift not bound by the natural laws of time nor space. They can detect where you are, who you're with, even the perfume the supposed mistress was wearing. The presence of a single stray hair is sufficient to confirm suspicions, and then like a judge she passes sentence: "I knew it. She's a SKANK!"

There was nothing wrong with Iryna's jealousy radar. It had been calibrated properly and functioning as programmed. It's just that there was no needle indicating the threat was of the paranormal kind. Had there been, she would have known that something had unwittingly bonded itself to me in an unholy matrimony presided over by the devil himself in that dusty desert cathedral known as Skinwalker Ranch.

The truth is I saw it coming sometime before she actually announced

she was leaving, the bitter tears welling in her doe-like eyes. The love I had grown accustomed to seeing whenever our eyes met had by that time rusted over and flaked away. The flame of love that had raged in her heart as we left for Vegas had shriveled to the flickering glow of a pilot light in the lonesome bowels of a basement boiler. With a hooked finger she drew a lock of blonde hair over one eye, as if to hide from me the truth. She had caught a glimpse of the doppelganger living within. She knew with the all-powerful, uncanny sense of jealousy that all female minds possess that something other than herself held my heart captive. It's still painful for me to this very day to talk about it, to relive the moment that she walked out to head for the big city, letting the door to our home close at her back.

Iryna and I before she set out for the Big City

The night it first happened I was in bed with my sheets wrapped about

me like a mummy slumbering contently through the afterlife. Suddenly I was jolted from my sleep by three loud bangs at my front door.

The thunderclap of the knocks rattled me from the comforts of a faraway dream. I went into spasm in the bed as if choked by my own covers. I fumbled blindly for the clock. Winking one eye open, I saw it was 3:00 am, the Witching Hour—a most superstitious time of night. It is in this hour a hellish doorway opens in mockery of the death of Jesus, and Satan and his horde of minions enjoy free reign over the earth, until the waking sun—as if it were the eye of God himself scolding their nighttime mischief—sends them withering back into the shadows of Hades.

I sprung from the bed and bolted for the door. Who could it be at such a late hour? Had someone died? Had authorities in Utah voiced my exploits to the local police? Perhaps the Men in Black had come to sneer an ominous warning, glaring at me from behind chalky white faces and demon black suits.

Giving the doorknob a strong handshake, I flung the door open with an air of authority to impress upon my knocking nemesis. Wide-eyed, my neck loosened from its rusty perch on my shoulders, I propelled my head forward as if to say, “This had better be good!” The empty night sky stared back at me, a particularly bright star twinkling a silent hello.

“What the h…?” I hissed behind bared teeth. A chill settled over my

spine like morning frost. My ding-dong-ditcher was of the ethereal type. I swung the door closed with a snap, twisting the deadbolt compulsively as if each furious turn would further fortify the lock. I crept back to the feigned comforts of my bed, pulling the covers up and over my head, the light on my nightstand an angel shepherding over me. Thousands of miles from Skinwalker Ranch, I whimpered softly, begging for sleep's blissful release.

Exposure to Skinwalker Ranch had infected me with an unknown paranormal neurotoxin, a supernatural sickness which coursed through my veins and haunted my waking hours. A proverb entered my last waking thought as I pulled the covers tight: *He that lies down with dogs shall rise up with fleas*.

These awful wretched entities! I had walked through their unclean desert chambers at unawares and some ghastly specter of a flea had scabbed itself from the mangy hide of a Skinwalker and burrowed itself deep within my soul, and at this very moment was taking its sustenance from my fears and from my pain. Of this I had no doubt. And worse, that rabid dog prowling the desert around Skinwalker Ranch had broken its leash and had made its way to my very door as if to reclaim what is his! With this thought consuming my tortured mind a fitful sleep fell upon me.

Over the course of the next three days, the same uninvited guest would summon me from my bed with three alarming knocks. Finding no

vaporous guest to entertain, I returned to the bedroom. My irritation grew as this continued into the fourth night. On this particular night, something altogether different occurred. My doorbell rang. “Ding-dong,” chimed the bell. Rubbing both eyes with two balled up fists, I began wondering if my otherworldly miscreant had realized the errors of his or her—most likely “its”—rude behavior and had made an adjustment. Disturbing me with ghostly knocks at such late hours was apparently not achieving the desired effect. It had just changed tactics.

I opened the door with apprehension, squinting through the two thin slits that were my eyes and spying the empty porch. I began wondering if I was the butt of some cosmic prank. Had my invisible intruder lit a fire to an equally invisible bag filled with Skinwalker poo and left it burning on my doorstep, as it giggling with rapturous anticipation waited for me to stomp it out? Was it out here waiting night after night for me to blindly stumble upon the gelatinous dimensionally-challenged surprise held within?

I imagine my guest laughing in indecipherable robotic beeps and chirps as it steps backwards into a telescoping portal. And just before the spiraling portal compresses itself into an infinitesimally small dot and winks out of existence, it catches a quick glimpse of me furiously wiping my slipper across my doorstep in a futile attempt to scrape the ectoplasmic slime from my soiled feet.

The Natives had warned me on numerous occasions that the Skinwalker was a “trickster”. Perhaps the term “prankster” would have been a more fitting title—a misbehaving, multidimensional jester heralded from some Loony Tunes dimension dedicated to the irritation of all mankind, God’s awful joke on man.

After suffering four nights of these games, I began to wonder if after hundreds of years of invisible multidimensional pies thrown in their solemn war-painted faces, the local Natives simply got fed up with the Skinwalker’s unamusing pranks, packed their papooses and forever banished themselves from the land, more out of annoyance than for fear.

Perhaps the only practical joke the Skinwalker ever pulled that the Natives agreed was actually funny was on adventurous white men like myself who dare trespass on forbidden lands. AVOID THE SKINWALKER AT ALL COSTS!! But not for fear. Nay! For peace of mind, like pulling the shades low to hide from the evil grinning child pedaling slowly past marking your house for egging, to piss in your bushes and toilet paper your trees.

What if there is no bewitched medicine man draped in animal skins, his bag dripping acid from the nefarious enchantments within? But rather just a misunderstood clown with a sad frown hung like a crooked picture on his wolfish face. What if there was a dimensional rift separating the Great Trickster from his curious audience mankind? His sadistic props would go

unseen, his robotic jokes unintelligible, and his malevolent act would remain forever beyond the comprehension of mortals.

This cat and mouse game continued until one day I simply refused to play. The nothingness ringing my doorbell was answered by…nothing. I had taken my few remaining chips off the table and refused to play another round. Most games take at least two participants to play, and my absence had left the prankster with a hand of solitaire as his lone means of entertainment.

Perhaps frustrated by my lack of participation it again changed tactics. I awoke startled by the sound of heavy footsteps lumbering towards my bedroom door. The sharp, biting horror of this new predicament had worn off, like brackish tarnish from a statute which has been touched by countless hands leaving only a polished bronze mirror behind.

I came to the realization that the more I fed into the lucidity of what was happening to me, the more I unwittingly breathed life into this clay golem. The more attention I gave, the more alive it became. The alien life form had acquired a taste for emotions, an appetite for belief and attention, and an insatiable craving to cross over into this world, my world. It had become a living construct of my imagination, and it was I who was giving it strength. The demon grew like an engorged flea feeding from the anxiety that troubled my brow. As it stomped towards my bedroom, it carried with it like a syphilitic parasite the initial stages of possession.

At that moment a comforting peace came over me, warmed me and embraced me. Perhaps there were other spiritual forces at play for I knew instantly what to do and how to react. It was all so simple. The blindfold had fallen from my eyes.

“It’s all so simple, all so simple,” I mouthed like a madman in my trancelike state.

As if to make its presence more pronounced, the invisible intruder paused outside my door and began shifting its weight from foot to foot. Each sway caused the wooden floor boards beneath to groan in agony from the sudden weight, and then sigh with creaking relief upon release. My spectral intruder was well into the throes of a supernatural hoedown vying pitifully for my attention, but receiving none.

I hit the mental mute button in my mind, shutting out the sympathy of destruction. I had stripped the fiend of its powers. Lacking my attention, the haunt fell silent and placid like a lake on a windless day. The noise ceased. Even the echoing thump of my heart in my forehead took on a natural rhythm, receding to its proper place within my chest.

I lived in a strange new world, a world that included an unwelcomed roommate. Overtime, the restless spirit rattled its spectral chains and stomped its invisible boots less and less. Not wanting to reward bad behavior, I paid him little attention. I focused my mind and thoughts on real world concerns.

The more I meshed with the problems of my reality, the more the door to that alternate universe closed shut. The footsteps of an unseen ghost became nothing more than my house settling to an abrupt temperature change. Pops, bangs, and thumps I attributed to my tabby cat chasing an imaginary ball of string. Whispering voices oozing from my bedroom walls were nothing more than a distant neighbor stepping out for a late night phone call.

I was lying to myself, and I knew it. I had dug myself into a paranormal sinkhole, and was now digging myself out with shovels full of bullshit. Books on goblins, ghouls, imps, fairies, Bigfoot and aliens I now locked safely away in my library case. I wanted to swallow the key.

Fourteen

The calling

Inaction breeds doubt and fear. Action breeds confidence and courage. If you want to conquer fear, do not sit home and think about it. Go out and get busy- Carnegie

The months passed slowly. Fall had settled in for a brief chilly spell. Pages from my calendar fell like the brittle leaves that brushed against my window. My mysterious guest had grown weary of his absent playmate, and I assume had returned to his desert abode. The doorbell stood silent for months. The haunting aches and creaks faded into distant memory, burying themselves somewhere in the past.

I sat alone for the first time in my silent empty home; the great invisible wizard had left and took the magic he brought with him. The adventure too was long gone. The parasitic worm that had entered my home had taken its bag of hallowed secrets, possibly the keys to the universe itself,

back to that haunted ranch in Utah.

Staring absently out my kitchen window I sighed, a wheezy breath of concentrated boredom fogging up a small patch of the pane. I watched as a circle of leaves tussled into a feathery pile, the wind patiently gathering them into a simple pyramid, and then as if displeased with its efforts, huffed and puffed and with one big gust strew them like confetti across my yard.

The answers were out there somewhere, thousands of miles away, but not here. An unexplainable calling resonated from deep within, calling me, drawing me back to the ranch.

“Now is the time. Hurry! Ryan, or you’ll miss it,” the Calling implored. I heard it like a child who answers the call of his father, a trusted commanding voice, calling me back home.

Ever the cleaver salesman, I convinced my unsuspecting brother, Tyson, to attend my next desert foray. He was the younger of the two of us, and considerably more soft-spoken. In fact, it would be fair to say that he was the polar opposite of me, the Ying to my Yang, if you will. He excelled at Math, Logic and all Sciences, and was more comfortable with a beer and a wrench in his calloused hands than a book and a pen, as am I. Physically, he’s of average build and height, sporting a fair complexion, sandy blonde hair and a kind, trusting face. Perhaps too trusting: Had he known what would befall him on our trip, he would have promptly told me to stuff it!

My wife and brother, Tyson

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I considered him to be a voice of calm reason, a quiet “think-things-out-first” kind of fellow. He was exactly the kind of guy I needed along with me out there in the desert to keep in check my impulsive and emotionally charged gung ho persona. Like the serpent offering Eve the poisoned apple of Knowledge, so too did I tempt him to the trip with promises of aliens, of adventure and a six of Miller-Lite.

Knowing what I know now, perhaps it would have been better if I had left well enough alone. We all have our separate paths to walk in life. The frightful path I had begun was not his. However, he, like I, would forever become a child of the Ranch, trapped within the inescapable ring of its alien allure like a snake trying to swallow its own tail, infected with the obsession that plagues all who either for pleasure or by misfortune visit the ranch,

whether adventurous soul, billionaire owner, or the gruff guards housed therein. To this very day my brother complains about things that follow him to his house and terrorize him at night.

It was late October, 2009, when we finally set out for Utah. This time I had made the decision to drive instead of fly, and rented a car locally. It was cheaper and gave us more flexibility. And I didn't have to concern myself with pretty Russian girls that couldn't drive. Tyson would split the chore with me.

Thankfully—in contrast to that first car ride, there really isn't much to say about the drive down there. It was an uneventful twenty hours and 1300 miles, give or take. We made a couple of stops along the way to grab a bite to eat and spent a night in a cheap, but comfortable roadside motel somewhere in Nebraska and not too far from Colorado. Tyson and I spent most of the time talking.

We arrived at our desert hideaway early on the third day of our road trip. The sweltering rays of the sun hammering down on us like a red hot mallet swung by a sweaty blacksmith were a stark reminder that we were no longer in the northern part of the country. I had decided our best option was the "secret spot" that Borden had brought me to that first trip to the ranch. The foreboding desert scene I remembered took on a refreshing new life during the day. It was here, and only here, that I felt truly at peace with the

universe.

A meditative calm enveloped and caressed me. A smile danced across my lips as I inhaled the electrified air euphorically. I felt energized, alive, and at peace with myself and my dusty surroundings. The hustle and bustle of chaotic life back home seemed to melt away and lose all meaning to the endless rolling hills and craggy mesas which stood picturesque before us. There was an electricity and excitement about the land, a place far off the beaten path, where a man could swan dive off the grid carefree and not feel the need to look back at the former life he was forced to inherit.

Here in this stretch of land, I have no doubt, there are portals of sorts. Introspective doorways that offer a good, hard look into the neglected, squeaky cogs, sagging springs and broken gears, clutching and clunking with each conscious thought and action we make throughout life—and the effect they have on others. Here, perhaps, it is possible to look into the living clockwork of our souls.

Wandering off, I found a nearby hilltop inviting me to unload my troubles. I sat there in a meditative position asking questions of the lonely mesa cliff: What do I really want out of life? Who am I, really? What does the future hold for me?

A rushing river of possible answers and imagined outcomes flooded my curious mind. But among these was not the answer to the one and only

question I truly sought: What does it all mean? So I asked ever so quietly, hoping the desert might overhear.

But this was, I sensed, a timeless secret the desert and all the Skinwalkers she held within would never part with. It was an answer that would await my very last moments on this Earth as the last tendrils of life ebb from my body and I make that final step into the afterlife.

“Let’s start setting up camp, we have a long night ahead,” I said with a sly wink to my brother.

I sat down gracelessly into the dirt, like a child content to forage about his sandbox, and began to unwind a tent I had recently purchased at Walmart, spreading its silky tapestry across the rock strewn ground. The tent’s box proudly stated, “2 PERSON TENT $19.99”. “A real ripping bargain”, I thought at the time. Unfolding the last of its creases, I casually gazed at the settling sheet of wrinkled blue plastic.

My mind was boggled at the sight and did a quick series of mathematical calculations. The sheet was about 4’ long by 4 ½’ wide. A cramped picture of our sleeping arrangement disturbed me, and more so, it angered the arithmetic professor buried somewhere within the wrinkled noodles of my brain.

My left cerebral hemisphere, accountable for logic, mathematics and speech had long ago given up trying to wrestle full control of my brain from

its foolish drunken neighbor floating to its right. The effort to unite both hemispheres under one rational leader proved to be futile. The wriggling responsible mass of neurons to the left had walked away from countless feuds as the soldiers to the right had tantalized with silly fantasies of women, aliens, star-gates, and cheap booze. In the end the left simply pitied its hopelessly disillusioned and conjoined twin, and agreed to meet for drinks at a sleazy bar located somewhere in my pituitary gland. A few poorly aimed headaches where thrown at each other, but in the end it was the right who shouldered his inebriated brother home, listening to babble about fantasies that even Mr. Right knew were just bat shit crazy.

Looking at the tent I realized no matter what impossible angle I imagined contorting my body into, there was no hope of a comfortable night sleep offered by that puny blue square. I grumbled, “What the heck!” at the fabric.

My brother’s hand slapped over his mouth, which was like loose rubber; his chin gobbled up and down as he laughed. “It’s a two person CHILD TENT, you idiot!” he said between a choking fit of laughter.

In angry protest, I wrenched the box onto my lap and flipped it around to read the fine print. It read, *Two person tent: Intended for children ages 6-12. I laughed at the stupidity of my error.

Sitting on my beanbag of dirt and rocks, laughing was really was all I

could do; after all, the closest store was 40 miles away.

"You are so freakin' cheap!" Tyson snorted with emphasis on the *so*. He would have said more, but the words were lost between bouts of laughter, which thankfully began to expire on their own.

"Well, you can just go out and buy the next one," I snarled, the edge of my lip curling up to match my eyebrow. With the clumsiness of a toddler playing with Lincoln Logs, I assembled something that may have been mistaken for a tent.

My brother took one look and shook his head slowly. He collapsed my beaver nest of plastic and stainless steel poles clean to the ground and pitched a proper tent. By a proper tent, I mean one that a child, correction make that two children, aged 6-12, could enjoy.

The tent now erect, we nestled our belongings within its pillow-like walls. Inside was housed a duffle bag stuffed with clothing, several gas station bought sandwiches, 4 large water bottles and my various research gadgets and gizmos. A pillow and blanket were also peppered somewhere within. A bottle of Grey Goose vodka was assigned double duty. It was to both stand guard at the zippered entrance and serve as our makeshift EMT.

I am of the opinion that should difficult times arise there is nothing better than a magical elixir. There in that bottle was much more than fermented potatoes. It was a potion from the gods—perhaps the fiery

Prometheus himself, a gift to numb mankind against inter-dimensional interlopers looking to scab a ride with the falling night sky, their boney fingers clutching at the reins of the approaching shadows, their wicked army submerging us in darkness.

Fifteen

Sick as a wolf

Men whose sense of taste is destroyed by sickness, sometimes think honey sour. A diseased eye does not see many things that do exist, and notes many things that do not exist. The same thing frequently takes place with the regard to the force of words, when the critic is inferior to the writer—Saint Basil

“I’m not feeling well,” announced my brother clenching at a sour stomach.

“Too much partying last night?” I jabbed teasingly.

“No, might be the ride and the shitty food. My stomach suddenly hurts. It’s like my guts are all tore up,” he said doubling over slightly. A grimace of pain streaked across his pallid face. Through grinding teeth he grunted, “I just need to lie down for a bit”.

I looked at my watch; it was 6:30pm. The sun was at that tipping point in the sky, unsure if it would hang around to entertain us a little longer, or get knocked off its brilliant pedestal by the coming moon, sending it

spiraling off the edge of the earth in a reddish orange haze. It reminded me of a large Water Park bucket gradually filling with water, until reaching that uneasy zenith where it begins to look a bit queasy, wobbles ever so slightly, and then vomits it contents to drown the children below.

“Hey! Tyson, you’re not looking so hot. Why don’t you just go to the tent and get some sleep? We still have a few hours before the spooks come out to play.”

Tyson at the campsite

He looked up and nodded, saying nothing. His blank eyes had turned a sickly shade of yellow. In a hunched over lurching movement, he made his way towards the tent, and wisely retired inside.

I spent the next thirty minutes meticulously cleaning my camera lens, untying and retying my boot straps and wrapping myself in ever growing

layers of tee-shirts and socks. The tee-shirts I needed for the cold, but the socks, the socks would save my feet from the biting blisters of the long walk ahead. Awaiting me was a winding journey through miles of endless desert, a thorny obstacle course of towering cliffs, washed out valleys, spiny mesas, and bottomless crevasses.

The sun had now begun its nightly descent towards the horizon beyond the barren desert wasteland. The creatures of the day scurried for the safety of burrows in the dusty floor or nests up in the trees and brush. The creatures of the night licked their fangs for the coming slaughter.

My wristwatch blinked 7:04 pm, each pause compelling me to start the daunting hike. In the far off distance an outcropping of rocks hung over the precipice of the ridgeline like the blade of a guillotine over Skinwalker Ranch. It was a place the locals fearfully call “Werewolf Ridge”. I wondered what had happened to the unfortunate soul who had given it such a wicked name. A chill prickled my spine at the very thought.

“Tyson, you awake?” I whispered into the tent—a tent that bulged like the stretched stomach of a woman impregnated by a demon, the creature held within writhing and kicking to tear free.

Campsite

A tired “Yeeeeup” came from the wriggling tent.

My brother is a man of few, but powerful, deeply cryptic and somber words rich with subtle meaning. He is famous for his “yeeeeup” and “maaaybeee”. And on those days when he’s feeling extra talkative, he may deign to treat one and all with his extra-special “ummmiiimmmhhoo.” For those not familiar, it is an idiomatic phrase which according to certain lost ancient Samarian texts translates loosely to, “I don’t know”.

Over the span of his life he must have deduced with the acumen of a linguist that these three phrases were vague enough to answer about any question life could possibly throw at him, with just enough obscurity that the person asking the question would feel somewhat satisfied by his response, if not slightly confused. For example: “Tyson, would you like to go out for drinks tonight?” may elicit the carefully crafted, “Maaaaybeee.” Or if he was feeling devilish, he might add in the double whammy, “Ummmmiiiiimmmmhhoo,” leaving the invitee in shaky limbo between YES

and NO. When friends ask if my brother would be joining us for drinks, I could only answer, “I think so…,” as I scratch my head, mimicking my friends who would be doing the same thing.

“The suns setting and I need to get out here before it is too dark,” I said, more agitated than concerned for my brother’s deteriorating health.

A long labored sigh wafted from the tent. “I don’t think I’m up for it. I just need more rest. I’m not sure what’s wrong with me; I felt fine the entire way up,” replied Tyson.

I began to wonder if this sudden illness was contracted by exposure to some unknown toxins permeating the desert air. According to Anthropologist Dan Benyshek of the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, quoted in Colm Kelleher and George Knapp's Hunt for the Skinwalker, “Skinwalkers do all sorts of terrible things - they make people sick”.

Dr. Colm Kelleher was the lead investigator for Robert Bigelow’s NIDS (National Institute for Discovery of Science) team in 1995, a team comprised of scientists from various academic backgrounds tasked with researching the various phenomena vying for attention at the ranch. When questioned about physical symptoms he and his team experienced while on the ranch he said, “Occupants on the ranch occasionally reported nosebleeds and headaches”.

“Tyson, do you have a nosebleed?” I inquisitively asked with the

bedside manner of a caring but clueless doctor.

The impish tent shook. “Nope, just my stomach and my head.”

I knew he would mention his head before he said it. It was the next ailment on my paranormal checklist. It was pounding like a tightly stretched drum, he said.

I was certain that the Skinwalker had marked my brother with this illness. He had marked him the same way a logger marks a tree for harvest with a large “X”, intending to return the next day with his axe to lay it low. My brother was hot with a feverish glow, a telltale sign of Skinwalker poisoning. A worm of contention grew in my stomach, nauseating me with the realization that I might be next.

I did a quick mental assessment of my own health. My finger crept to my nose and massaged it like a lump of dough. Thankfully, no creamy red filling spurted out. I moved to my head, waiting for the tidal wave of a headache to come crashing against the sides of my skull.

“Nothing but calm clear seas upstairs, Cap’n,” I said to myself. I felt fine.

No, I felt better than fine. I felt like a compressed coil waiting to let loose into the desert.

The tent ruffled slightly. A few muffled grunts and groans escaped. Tyson was in no shape for the arduous trip ahead.

“I would soon be alone.” The thought cast a haunting spell over me. “Once again, Ryan, all alone, just you and us…”

Some poisonous seed within my psyche sought to torment me with dark thoughts. I could not discern if they were my own or an alien invader had smuggled them there.

The voice within taunted me. “Alone, with only troubled thoughts and the pale red glow of your headlamp for companionship.”

I wanted to cry. I wanted to shout at the wind, “Leave me alone!” I wanted to go home. I had strayed far off the familiar path of civilization. As I ventured down the path of the Skinwalker, I realized with growing horror there was no path back home.

A hazy orange halo encircled the snow covered peaks of the distant blue colored mountains like the crown of a fallen angel. The sun was marching steadily towards the west. I needed to head south before its guiding light would be lost. I glanced at my watch. It was 7:32. My internal debate had cost me more than 25 minutes. I was behind schedule.

Me getting ready to set out for the ranch

Sixteen

Werewolf ridge

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.-Albert Einstein

“Tyson, I can’t wait any longer. I’m sorry, I really need to go,” I announced. Only murmurs and moans grunted from the tent.

Moments later a sad “ok” followed by a well-timed “yeeeeup” was overheard. I felt terrible leaving him behind.

A selfish thought crossed my mind, “How come he gets to sit here in the safety of our campsite and I have to go off alone?” If I had only known what would happen to him later that night, I would have forever banished such thoughts. He was the one the Skinwalker had marked for torment, not me.

I gave my boot laces a firm tug, wiggling my toes slightly as I did so.

My backpack I retrieved from the prickly arms of a nearby sage bush which held it like an overburdened butler. My camera strap I wound across my shoulder, and wrapped the elastic band of my headlamp around my forehead. It snapped tight with a slight sting. I took a few cautious steps towards the ranch. A belabored moan from the tent stopped me. Digging into my coat pockets I felt the familiar touch of my walkie-talkies. I flipped one on. Its tiny grey screen gave a faint glow as it displayed three full bars of battery. Not wanting to repeat my tent mishap, a foggy memory of the radio's instruction booklet swam into focus. "3 Mile Talking Radius," I think it said. No, wait—it may have said, "1 Mile Radius". I couldn't remember which! In the course of the next few hours we would find out regardless.

I tip-toed towards the tent, hoping to toss the walkie-talkie inside without disturbing my brother. As I unzipped the tent my fingers palsied in anticipation of a living corpse staring back at me from inside. I peered cautiously into the dark recesses of the tent's infirmary. My brother was sitting up and appeared livelier than anticipated.

"What's up duuude?" he said, a sickly grin smeared across a sweaty face.

"You feeling any better?" I asked.

"I'm not going with you, if that's what you're wondering," he said still smiling.

Behind that smile his head swiveled and bobbed as if it sat upon a well-oiled ball bearing.

“Well, at least take this. I’ll be on channel 2,” I said offering the walkie-talkie.

His sweaty meat-hooks made a surprisingly energetic grab for my radio. We started to synchronize the two devices. The ball of my thumb slid across the talk button, his radio chirped a static crackling reply.

“Should you need me for any reason just push this red button. It’s the emergency button,” I said proudly. Not nearly so proudly, I remembered running with my tail between my legs from a fiery ball of light, my finger frantically stabbing at that same button as if it controlled an ejection seat.

“No duh,” said Tyson listlessly. “I need to get some more rest. I’m still not feeling so great”.

We said our brief goodbyes, and I left my brother behind to sweat out whatever demonic illness plagued him. So began my solo voyage into the desolate desert beyond, Skinwalker Ranch calling me from afar.

I trekked across the forbidden landscape. Past the fence with its three strands of metal wire and barbed claws, the rotted wooden posts since replaced by steel posts, each painted green and standing as tall as a man. I passed beneath the hissing pythons of the electric tower and towards the ranch hidden behind a labyrinth of mesas which stretched endlessly across

the horizon.

Along the way, I stopped to investigate several bizarre rock formations, and one in particular. It looked out of place in contrast to the random craggy boulders strewn about and caught my attention. It was made up of long, narrow slabs of grey stone laid side by side fitting as neatly together as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and sure enough, when viewed by satellite—which I did at a later time—it unquestionably looks like the remnants of a prehistoric stone road.

One of the formations of interest.

“All roads lead to Rome,” I said aloud, marveling at the potential archeological discovery before me. I took a step up onto its surface and resumed my hike in the direction in which it lay—directly towards the ranch. Ancient highway or no, it was now *the Path of the Skinwalke*r.

The ancient "road" I walked upon

To pass the time, I imagined the ancient artisans who crafted each block beneath my feet and the countless laborers who must have laid them in place. Surely they were a people that time has forgotten. Where did they go, and what purpose did this road have here in the emptiness of the desert? Had they managed to open a portal, a gateway to another universe, a door once opened that could not be shut? Had they been the architects of their own destruction, perhaps following this very road only to be swallowed by slumbering titans disturbed by its creation? I imagined dark gods stepping across some impregnable barrier of time and space, their sulfuric hooves rested within our own world.

Like the Tower of Babble, these granite stones are perhaps all that remain of a once advanced people, a crumbled testament warning future generations of man as to the consequences of opening the doorway into alternative dimensions.

Perhaps ancient man had long ago caused a tear in the ethereal body

of time and space, a window into a dimensional abyss that alien entities in diverse form use as a bridge between our two worlds, a sentient quantum conscious treating our three dimensional plane of existence as if it were their own devil's playground. I imagined a gash bleeding demons.

A crackle from my radio woke me from the nightmare.

"Ryan?" said a concerned voice on the other end. "Can you hear me?"

"Ya, you're coming in pretty clear," I replied. "I'm still walking towards the Ranch. I'm about 2 miles out and just about there," I said between aspirated pants. I stopped and asked, "By the way, how yah feeling?"

No reply came from the silent walkie-talkie. I thought maybe I had ventured beyond its range and lost him. Then again something might have happened to him. I wondered if he was in need of help. I didn't know. He's my brother, my only brother; I needed to know he was safe. I backtracked a few strides and tried again.

"Tyson, can you hear me?!" I said in a hushed shout. I cupped my hands tightly around the radio as if holding a small bird, fearing my pleas might escape my hands and be carried away by the wind to the ear of a patrolling guard. I heard nothing. A long, single static hiss emitted from the radio like the last breath of a dying man. The radio then fell silent.

“Tyson, are you there? Are you ok?” I said in a panicked plea.

Only the broken howl of the wind as it whistled a long empty note came back in reply. The lonely tune filled the dead air. He was gone, and so was the message he was trying to tell me. I had walked too far to turn around now. Sheep find comfort in lies, believing they are safe within the herd. Wolves find comfort in the loneliness of their hunt. As I walked through the desert I was a sheep wearing the skin of a wolf, a false Skinwalker, if you will.

I convinced myself Tyson would be fine, that our radios were simply out of range, and that he was only calling to check on me. This gave me a sense of peace—albeit perhaps false—as I hiked towards the Ranch. A spiraling mesa towered in the distance, its crooked bluff overlooking a lunar landscape below. I climbed to the top. Standing on the mesa’s precipice, I spied “Werewolf Ridge”. It lay a short jog from where I stood. The finish line now in sight, I climbed down and raced towards the cliff, my backpack thumping against my ribs like the heels of a horse jockey. Galloping as fast as my grinding knees would allow I made short work of the distance.

Seventeen

The ranch

How lovely are the portals of the night,
When stars come out to watch the daylight die.-Thomas Cole

I approached the ridgeline like a stalking cat. I knew my silhouette, rising above the ridgeline, could be seen by the watchful guards below. I wisely retreated to the shadows of two enormous boulders overlooking the valley like two sentries. Hidden below and nestled somewhere within the dry ravine stood Skinwalker Ranch. With the precise movement of an automaton, I silently unraveled my map. My index finger slid across its dusty page. I was a quarter of a mile north of the ranch. Too close for comfort. I worked to control my labored breathing. I inhaled deep intoxicating breaths, and let out a silent whistle. My squinting eyes shifted to and fro, paranoid the guards might hear even this! I felt the train-like chug of my heartbeat and knew it

was safely contained within my chest's soundproof walls. I paid the internal murmur little attention.

Out of nowhere, I heard in my head the scolding voice of my mother: "Ryan, it's time to go to bed. Lights Out! And don't let me catch you turning it back on, mister…Oh, and stop talking to your little brother!!"

For the time being, her last ghostly warning had resolved on its own. No more red glow from my headlamp to guide my way. No more lights period, no more talking, nothing but silence from here on out. I would become just another inanimate fixture populating the desert's floor, no more alive than the rock behind me. The desert would be my protector. Its dirt would mask my scent, its boulders would hide me, the wind sweeping its floor would steal my voice and the shadows of the night would be my camouflage. I stared directly into the smoldering orange sun which burned above the western horizon. As I sat there touched by the last rays of the fallen day, a smile slipped across my face.

North of the Ranch

The last tendrils of fading light licked at the distant mountain tops. I peered cautiously over the boulder's edge, hoping to catch my first glimpse of the fabled ranch. An old white structure sat quietly in the valley below. From there, a gravel road led to a large gate littered with NO TRESPASSING signs. The structure wasn't a traditional house, but a weathered single story trailer with cheap tin siding and in need of a fresh coat of paint. A rusty metal railing snaked around its perimeter and terminated at a grimy door. Thick patches of overgrown grass surrounded the home, threatening to swallow it. All in all, it was reminiscent of other surrounding ranches; quaint, unassuming and hardly the desert hideaway of a billionaire.

Looking down upon the ranch buildings

A bright white semi-trailer was tucked beneath the ridge, purportedly where the weary guards slept. A lone telephone pole stood purposefully behind the home. On top it held a large transformer, and above that, a sodium light cast a furious orange glow in all directions. In the western field a thick herd of black bulls milled about, munching and tearing at the lush grass. It looked like any other ordinary ranch, except, of course, for the three ominous “bait pens” dotting the fields.

The bait pens are fenced in strips of land about 70 or 80’ long, maybe 10’ wide and completely surrounded by a chain fence no less than 6’ high. On one end there is a simple wood structure that serves as a watch tower or platform. It’s about seven feet off the ground and accessible only by single ladder running straight up from the ground. The structure itself has a three foot wall that goes all the way around and a roof about 8’ overhead with a slightly extended eave. The one I was staring at was backed up to the solid

granite face of the stone wall towering above it.

Rumors are that the NIDS researchers place live baby heifers into the pens and shackle them to the ground with a sturdy stake. From the observation towers they then watch as some unseen force eviscerates the unsuspecting calf. In a matter of minutes, the live calf is dissected before the inquisitive eyes and, I imagine, furiously moving pens of the scientists.

Bait pen

It is further rumored that the heifers have their eyes removed, tongues sliced out and organs pureed. Despite the ferocity of the process, apparently the invisible assailant is not a messy eater. The calf's blood is sucked dry as neatly as if draining a glass of red wine as compliment to a saucy plate of spaghetti. From where I stood, the calf's only escape from this inter-dimensional slaughterhouse would be a quick death by heart attack. The bait

pens were currently uninhabited, thank God.

The pastures below cradled yet another surprise. Three wooden poles sprouted from the fields like thorns, each mounted with a nest of surveillance cameras. Perhaps, it occurred to me, one of these cameras was recording me right now. It made me even more nervous.

The cameras had been installed by NIDS researchers in an effort to record evidence of paranormal activity on the ranch. On July 20, 1998, activity of that kind took place. It was an event, by all accounts, that had the scientists scratching their heads and throwing papers wildly into the air in hot debate. And if I understand correctly, still has not been resolved to this day. On that date, the security camera pole standing before me was vandalized.

At exactly 8:30 pm, the cameras on pole #1 went dead. The NIDS team, being the clever group of researchers they were, foresaw such an event, and formulated a triangulated surveillance trap. Each security pole had

cameras facing the two opposite poles. Should a camera on pole #1 be tampered with, cameras positioned on poles #2 and #3 would record the act of sabotage.

At the moment of the crime, cameras #2 and #3 where recording as the power indicator on pole #1 suddenly went dark. Surveying the crime scene, investigators found that the duct tape securing the wires had been unwound and was missing. The sturdy PVC pipe that had been screwed into the wooden pole was torn off and the wires themselves were badly severed.

The aftermath of the crime was visible, but who was the culprit? Some believe it was a disgruntled NIDS employee who knew which wires to cut and when to cut them. Others suggest it was some UFO kook hiding behind a rock in the ridgeline above that saw the cameras below as a threat and took decisive action.

Whoever it was, the crime was brazen, it was violent, and most

disturbing of all it was absolutely impossible. The destruction occurred in less than a second. For those who prefer something more concrete, it was the mere nanoseconds that link one video frame to the next or, if you prefer, the heart-skipping blur of a hummingbird’s wings.

Whoever or whatever was responsible should have been clearly visible. It is a technicality of the law of physics that no solid body or mass can circumvent. Unless, of course, whatever caused the destruction was operating within its own temporal timeline and capable of moving outside the limitations of the dimensions that apply to our world. Only then could the culprit manage such a daring caper.

Cattle recorded grazing next to the disturbed pole were blissfully unaware of the momentary interruption in their time/space continuum. They bowed their heads in silent prayer to the earth, munching on their communion of grass, oblivious to the intruder in their midst.

Cattle grazing upon the ranch

Colonel John Alexander, lead counsel to the NIDS team, in an article published in *Fate Magazine* revealed, “The cattle just happened to have been grazing right around the camera #1 pole at that same moment. They did not move in any excessive or excited manner.”

I cautiously looked over the rim of my boulder. My squinting eyes peered into the waning light, straining to locate the cattle. I held on to the hope that some invisible creature would tear the cameras below to shreds. Seeing neither specter nor beast at pole #1, I meticulously swept the field. My gaze fell upon several bulls grazing at pole #2. They looked like flakes of pepper freckling a steak infested with a forest of hairy green mold. A fitting

description, for no matter how much seasoning you apply, you can never add enough to flavor moldy meat.

On a similar note, mortal man cannot flavor the Skinwalker's barren wasteland, a land festering with nightmarish secrets and portals popping open like inflamed blisters. Regardless of how much water, nutrients and pedigreed cattle the ranch's owners sprinkled, there was no flavor within the Devil's unfertile garden.

Eighteen

Invisible intruder

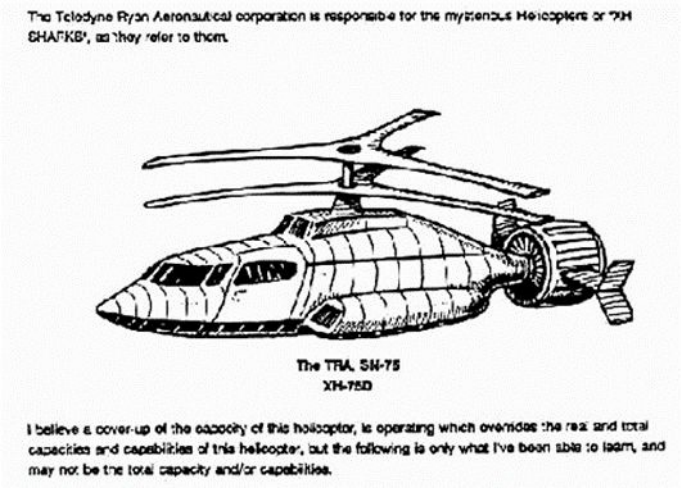
"As a rule, men worry more about what they can't see than about what they can."
Julius Caesar

Shadows grew along the desert floor until spilling down the ridgeline they washed out onto the ranch below. A deep resounding boom echoed off the surrounding canyon walls. Several more jolted me as I scampered behind my rock. A repeating tempo was heard in the distance. Thump… thump…. THUMP! Beat the unseen drums. The sound grew in intensity with each deafening blow. Whatever wretched machine had produced the thunderous noise was advancing steadily from the Ranch. However, Skinwalker Ranch seemed quite undisturbed and as quiet as a church pew on a Monday morning. The cattle below grazed contently and apparently oblivious to the sound. The guards remained absent, perhaps asleep.

“Stupid cows!” my mind screamed, how could they not hear the claps of thunder that smashed above their horns? Why weren’t they stampeding in all directions?

As if reacting to my observation, the cattle froze solid, stood still, and were mute. A daze had settled over the entire herd. They were bewitched. I frantically searched the hazy sky for the source, and saw none. The noise fell upon me as if the sound itself had weight. I cringed in terror and curled into a small ball upon the ground. I was sure that some invisible chariot of the gods hovered above me! I imagined a secret stealth helicopter being piloted above the lonely mesas.

There was no mythical Skinwalker. Rather, I had stumbled onto a top secret military test site, ripe with technological secrets. As the object hovered invisibly over me, the thumps became a long drawn out “swooooooosh, swooooooosh, swooooosh,” as if a massive blade was slowly twirling mere feet above my head.


The Teledyne Ryan Aeronautical corporation is responsible for the mysterious Helicopters or 'XH
SHARKS', as they refer to them.
The TRA, SH-75
XH-75D
I believe a cover-up of the capacity of this helicopter, is operating which overrides the real and total
capacities and capabilities of this helicopter, but the following is only what I've been able to learn, and
may not be the total capacity and/or capabilities.

I thought this might have been overhead

It would have had to been an amazing technology, the very thought breathtaking to say the least—an engine that makes no sound, a body which cannot be seen. Here were my tax dollars hard at work. I was privy to a spectacle so rare that men would kill to see it, or be killed for having done so.

Despite my trepidation and fear, I relaxed ever so slightly. I even lit a cigarette, breaking my golden rule of “Lights Out”. I inhaled deeply, warming my lungs, and exhaled a billowing cloud of smoke, tar and pure relaxation. I imagined the American pilot looking down on me like a man looking through a one way mirror, his jet black visor illuminated by a wicked array of blinking lights and exotic technology.

Looking up, I gave a casual wave in the general direction of the noisy space of nothingness above. The noise did not pander, nor did it hesitate for long. It slowly chopped its way north, towards my brother. The beats echoed

softer and softer against the canyon walls until only the noise of silence returned. Squeezing the dying ember of my cigarette between my forefingers, a parlor trick I learned at some long forgotten party, I reflected on what I had seen. A sudden thought bolted me upright. What if that noise wasn't the giant spinning blade of a super-secret helicopter?

A more sinister conclusion crept into my brain like a spider testing newly spun web. What if the noise wasn't a blade at all? What if…. it was FLAPPING WINGS!?

I felt the familiar nauseating feeling that comes from being a victim to the paranormal unknown, a mixture of spiraling confusion and stomach churning delirium born from the realization that I occupy the same space and breathe, the same air, as an alien intelligence that is not only not from this planet, but not from the entire universe.

As a child, I would imagine what wonders lay on the other side of a black hole. With a dizzying clarity I knew that moments ago I had met one of its dark inhabitants. The realization left me a basket case, a pinwheel of spinning emotions.

I said to myself, "This was a positive experience, Ryan! How lucky you are! Only Angels have –", and before I could finish, I knew all too well, "…. Oh dear God, so too, do Demons…"

My meditative state was suddenly interrupted by interference buzzing

off my radio. “Tyson?” I clamored my mouth close to the mic.

“Ryan…something is flying towards me!” the radio cracked back, his voice a trembling panic.

“What happened? Why didn’t you respond to me earlier?” I asked.

Only a hissing static buzz screeched back at me, followed by a long silence. “Tyson!?” I whispered into the microphone.

“I can’t talk now. It’s all over me!” he said.

The sound of rustling fabric and the shriek of a zipper was overheard.

“It looks like a… a… a massive black bird, the wings Ryan—they are HUGE! They must be at least twenty to thirty feet across.”

“You see it too? It flew over me only moments ago!” I said, forgetting to hit the talk button. But it wouldn’t have mattered. Tyson’s finger was still glued to the button as he continued speaking.

“Whatever it is, it’s massive. It’s hard to make out a shape. I think it’s a bird, but I’m not sure. I can’t believe what I’m seeing! I…I…I don’t see it anymore. It’s gone. You’ve got to get back here. I need to tell you what happened to me”, he said, choking on words which came out in panting gasps.

“Tyson, try to calm down. I told you this stuff out here is real. The same thing just flew over me moments ago. It was right above my head and I couldn’t see it! What happened to you back there, I’ve been trying over and

over to reach you?"

"Something happened to me alright," his voice grew somber and serious. "I was sleeping, or trying to at least, and suddenly I heard what sounded like a car's noisy engine idling next to the tent."

"Holy shit, who was it? Was it the guards? Police? Are you ok?" I stammered.

"Well, that's exactly what I thought, at first. So I'm here alone sleeping in this tent, sick as a dog, when suddenly I hear this engine roaring like someone's stomping on the gas, like they want me to know, you know? Moments before that, I heard several gun shots in the distance, and I thought, oh my god, the guards must have shot you and now they are coming to finish me off".

I cut him off saying, "I'm fine. There is a gun range to the east. All the locals shoot there." Giggling like a girl into the radio, I added, "I'm sure that's what you heard."

The thought of my poor, sick brother trapped in a two-child tent, imagining me lying dead in the desert while all along it was locals popping off a few rounds at the nearby range, somehow tickled my dry sense of humor, which at the moment was more arid than the surrounding desert.

"This isn't fucking funny. You need to hear what happened next."

"Yeah, sorry! You're right, please continue. But before you do, I need

to know if you are alright. Are you ok?"

"Well, I don't know. I'm not sure," he said with a sharp pause. "So I'm sitting here ready to shoot outside and run for my life, when suddenly I'm paralyzed. It was like my body was suddenly made of wood; I'm frozen solid as a statue; I can't move. The only muscle I could move was my eyes. Ryan, it gets weirder. I was suddenly seeing these pictures in my mind or maybe I was hallucinating, but I kept seeing these faces of people I have never seen before, young people, old people and people of all different races. It was like being shown mug shots of strangers; they kept flashing one after another before my astonished eyes. I was horrified. I could only move my eyes; I couldn't even scream".

"Oh, my god! What happened next?" I asked.

"The entire time this was happening, I heard your voice calling me over the radio but I couldn't respond. I could only watch as these pictures were shown to me. I have no idea what any of it means. The noise of the running car stopped and moments later I could move again. It didn't all come back at once, however. It started with my left pinkie finger which began to twitch, then a toe wiggled, and all at once I could move everything. I sprang from the tent and leapt outside. Nothing, no car, no guards. Ryan, there was nothing. The tree line next to the camp, you know the one with all those Russian Olives and the brook running through it?"

“Yah, I know,” I chipped back.

“Well, suddenly the trees began to rustle as if a thousand birds had taken nest there. As I looked around for the car, the tree branches began to shake and a chorus of birds or something hiding within made a maddening commotion. All at once these black things flew up into the air, hundreds, maybe thousands of them, falling into each other, merging, until above me was that…thing, that bird, flapping its massive wings. It’s gone now, and thank god. I had no idea what was happening. I don’t think it’s safe here.”

“Well it sounds like whatever it was, it is gone now,” I said. “Besides, I’m two or three miles away and perched on a cliff overlooking Skinwa-“

A hushed whisper stabbed through the air, stopping me in mid-sentence. A few more quick whispered words descended from the heavens. “Tyson, something…is…happening.” I stopped to listen. “I got to go. NOW!”

Nineteen

The desert speaks

Hearing voices no one else can hear isn't a good sign, even in the wizarding world.

-J. K. Rowling

The air above me was alive, rich with an ethereal conversation. A spoken language possessing a dreamlike familiarity illuminated my ears. Yet the words were foreign as they pierced through the electric air.

“Eta hunta chi chapa,” spoke a masculine voice.

Another responded in a robotic neutral monotone, conversational but serious.

Whoever it was, they were somewhere off to my right.

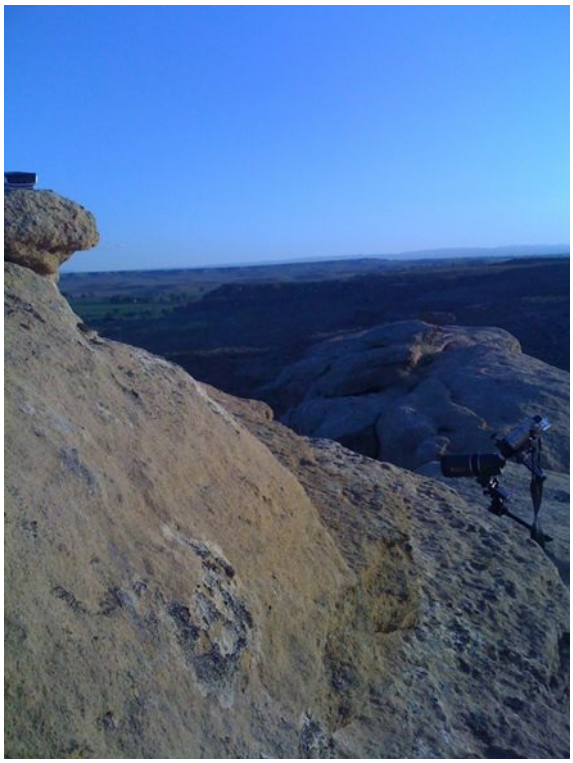
My hand holding the radio shook and trembled with a life of its own. My neck slowly rotated upwards like a rickety old drawbridge. My eyes rolled around dizzyingly taking it all in. The sky was a muddy orange hue; a

single star twinkled on the eastern horizon. There was nothing to see. The sky was empty. Yet there it was, a phantom voice with no owner. The faint outline of a distant cloud floating in a sea of twilight painted the night sky.

The voices now furiously shouted down commanding tones, “Muta crakta heuta!”—or something similar to that nonsense. Every strand of hair stood to attention. Gooseflesh prickled across my trembling skin.

“This is really happening, this is really happening…” I yammered, my lower lip no more than a babbling flap of skin.

By my estimates the voices, muffled but distinct, where coming from twenty feet above my head. From where I was, I could feel the intense stare of their eyes. They were like smoldering coals burning hot with hatred from behind a dimensional curtain. I am at a loss to explain how I knew, but I knew it instantly, nonetheless. The consciousness was discussing me. It wanted to know who I was and what to do with me. Who was this foolish mortal man who dared to walk the path of the Skinwalker?



Same spot I heard the voices

As if a switch had been flipped off, the voices and their mysterious hosts vanished into thin air. The familiar sounds of the night returned. The desert ambience washed away any trace of my haunted hosts' presence, like a receding tide washing out footsteps along a sandy shore. One sound did manage to disturb my brief return to normalcy.

The radio squelched an awful tone, "Cchhhhhsssssshhhhh!"

My heart beat quickened, my goose bumps alive and on guard.

"Ryan, what is happening out there? Hello? Are you there?" came a familiar voice through the radio.

"Yah, I'm here. I don't know what just happened. This is crazy. I just

had two voices talking over my head!" I said in disbelief. "I mean, I was just talking to you when suddenly I heard two men, right here, talking. I couldn't see either one and have no clue what they were saying; but they were here, they were real! Whatever is out here, it knows we are here, little brother, and I think it wants us out."

The weight of those last few words weighed heavily on my oversaturated mind like a wet sponge trying to absorb the entire contents of a bathtub. I thought now might be an excellent time to take a nip of grandpa's cough medicine. I needed to calm down. This was all far, far, far too weird, even for me.

"Shit!" I cursed, as I remembered I left the vodka bottle several miles back at base camp. My brother was most likely nursing his emotional wounds with it right now. The thought left me grumbling to myself.

An uneventful hour passed, or was it two? I couldn't tell; in the moonless night I quickly lost track of time. I crammed my wristwatch inside my coat protectively so no light would escape. Pushing a button, a dull blue glow flashed 10:19 PM. A satisfying yawn escaped my stretched lips. My eyelids popped open only to shutter closed moments later, and my eyes rolled around and around as if riding a Ferris wheel in their sockets. I was fighting off an unexplained daze that caught me out of nowhere like an invisible jab to the chin. My sight glazed and I teetered, ready to pay the sandman a dreamy

visit. I tried to force a yawn to clear my head, but my eyes narrowed to nothing more than a single elongated slit. At the moment I was about to succumb, I saw a yellow fuzzy light appear on the field below.

Twenty

Phantom lights

Come forth into the light of things, let nature be your teacher. -William Wordsworth

I rubbed my eyes with balled fists, deliberately punishing them for tricking me so. Yet there it still was, a yellow ball, clear as day—or as night, floating among the cattle. Oh! Wait. Yes, there was another one, and yet another, oh and another. Oh my god! They were everywhere now, each about the size of a basketball; no, slightly smaller, maybe a softball, yes, softballs pulsating an eerie yellow-green glow. The field was full of them now. I counted eight or nine, whizzing and buzzing among the cattle.

"Tyson, I got action here!" I squeaked like a mouse into my radio. "Balls of light everywhere. Anything going on over there?"

"Ummmmmmiiiiinnnnhhhh," he said in his bland trademark reply.

"Well these things are freakin' everywhere. It's unbelievable. They

just suddenly popped up in the field. I need to go. I've got to get this on film".

Like a hunter sliding his rifle over his shoulder, I drew my video camera and steadied it with the measured precision of a seasoned marksman, taking aim on the field below. My previous visit to the ranch had rendered my prior camera a broken pile of plastic and twisted silicon, currently rusting away in some junkyard back in Wisconsin.

My new camera had all the frilly bells and whistles. As women saw me strolling down the street with this bad boy swinging from my shoulder a few swooned, some fawned. I'm told one or two actually fainted! I was in nerd heaven salivating over its features—an eye popping 30x zoom and a jaw dropping 1080 high definition. However, the real must-have component for any true "Skinwalker Hunter" was the internal CMOS Sensor that intensifies light in even the darkest of conditions.

The lights continued to buzz and hover over the field. A few even timidly approached the house, or at least where I remembered the house to be. Now, however, there was only the blinding orange blaze of the sodium security light radiating like a forest fire in the moonless fields below.

I perched the camera on a sturdy rock and pressed the record button. A tiny red light blipped on, blinking every few seconds. With a single fluid motion, I drew my binoculars from my backpack as if pulling a samurai's

sword from a sheath. It was my favorite toy in my paranormal arsenal. This particular model is constructed from a special lens compound which allows use even under low light. The manufacturer states, “Unlike night vision which amplifies light electronically, these special binoculars allow higher levels of light transmission so you can see a natural image at dusk”.

I pressed the binocular firmly to my eyes, leaving two dusty circles which tattooed my sockets. Peering through the grimy lens, a murky blurred image unfolded. I unglued the binoculars from my raccoon spotted eyes, dribbled some spit onto the lenses and hastily rubbed the soggy mixture away with the cuff of my sleeve. Much better: I could see bushes, ferns, trees and even a few cows ambling about.

As I goggled the field, I occasionally looked up to re-orientate my aim. After a few minor adjustments, a hellishly green glow lit up the rock face. Looking up ever so slightly, I saw it. It was a pulsating blob of pure light, a burning torch suspended with no visible means and hovering above the field. I tickled the focus lens with care bringing the incredible sight into clarity. I was determined to discover what marvelous contraption was responsible for this desert mirage.

Looking back on the moment, to call the light either a “ball” or an “orb” doesn’t accurately describe what I was seeing. What I saw before me lacked the substantial mass that the image of a ball or an orb conveys. This

was nothing more than a light that grew with hedonistic intensity and then deflated into nothingness. It expanded and contracted in the way that the heart does, pumping light throughout unseen veins in a rhythmic, yet nightmarish never ending cycle.

My interest was piqued. I knew with the shrewdness of a wizened old man that when the lights next winked out, the culprit responsible for this mystery would be unveiled. This in mind, I yanked my night vision scope from my backpack and stabbed it into my eye. As I did so, the desert was washed in a vivid green infrared ambience.

Peering through the scope, the phantom light appeared fierce, stark and white in color. It angrily bellowed and blazed as if fed by gasoline, and then as if the fuel it was consuming was suddenly exhausted, it extinguished without a trace, not the slightest spark to mark the inferno that only seconds before filled my lens. The night vision scope didn't have the binoculars' zoom capabilities; however, the clarity, oh god, the beautiful clarity was amazing! I could see the leafy arms of a bush swaying with each puff of wind and the wandering trails of craters left behind by the cattle going this way and that.

Where the light I had been watching only a moment before had hovered stood now a tangle of dry weeds and a sickly gnarled tree. The light, and whatever caused it, had blinked out of my reality and momentarily leaped

to a higher dimension.

Maybe it was never there to begin with. Perhaps I had gone clinically mad and was experiencing the throes of an induced hallucination. I considered it possible that I had been the unwitting subject of a military experiment, a group of scientist observing with clinical interest as they projected false images into my mind's eye. I was the lab rat let loose within their desert maze.

I clawed at a few rogue granules of sand absently lodged somewhere in the pit of my eye, hoping to find sanity in the act. Wrapping the meat of my eyebrow tightly around the scope, I raised it up and looked through the lens, and there was the spectral light once again beaming back at me, willing me to dissect it with scrutinizing eyes. It proudly flamed with the exact same lucidity as the security light towering over the ranch.

This was no hallucination, this had to be real. Whatever these things were and from whence they came I have no clue, but the lights were as real to me as the molecules in the oxygen I breath.

Believe me when I say that I am fully aware that light is a collection of photons and intangible by its very nature. I know that I can no more hold a ray of light in the palm of my hand than peel a man's shadow from the ground, or lift only the flame from its wick. Nonetheless, here these phantoms were, as real as lightning flashing from a cloud's wand. It had no

visible source from which it burned, yet it was clearly there!

Three of the lights broke from the pack and floated towards the house.

“Oh boy, this is going to get good,” I thought, as a worm of excitement tickled its way through my intestines.

The lights surrounded the dark ranch home making the white walls glow a spooky green. I gasped at the haunting scene before me. They then formed a huddle as if preparing for their next move. Two lights broke away and began climbing the roof. The third blasted off towards the telephone pole holding the security light, and above that, the transformer. The twin lights buzzed above the home in anticipation of their rooftop assault. As they descended over the roof, the shingles below illuminated a green radioactive glow.

Slightly puzzled, I noticed the light shining down from the hovering balls produced a half crescent shape on the rooftop. It gave the impression that they were not balls at all. I found it rather reminiscent of light beaming from a submarine’s porthole mystifying the creatures lurking in the inky black void outside. Based on the crescent pattern spread across the shingles, I immediately thought of the headlights fixed onto an old Chevy truck. But then something more terrifying came to mind and the thought of old trucks was gone. It looked like monstrous eyeballs! The glittering white eye beaming brightly as it blinked opened, and then disappearing altogether with

a devilish wink.

The orange security light

Suddenly, the other light shimmied up the telephone pole, around and around it spun, climbing higher with each turn. It danced above the transformer and shook with wicked trepidation. The light moved in for the kill, kissing the top of the transformer. As it did so, a shower of sparks sprayed from the pole.

The night sky erupted with a blue brilliant flash. The orange security light blinked several times in brief electrical spasms, pulsating in sync with the light, before dimming and going dark. The lamps inside the ranch house fizzled and dimmed, winking out one by one. Shouts and curses could be heard coming from below. A door to the guard's trailer flung open, banging against the trailer's steel side with a clang. A grumbling guard tumbled out

and made his way towards the lamppost.

I was perplexed by what I saw next. As the guard marched towards the pole, one of the ghostly lights fell in step behind him, shadowing his every move. The guard appeared oblivious to the goblin green light creeping over his shoulder as he muttered and cursed. At the lamppost, he opened a breaker box pawing at the nest of wire, digging for the switches. He flipped the breaker on and the orange sodium light roared back to life, the ranch house fluoresced; power was restored.

I felt a sneeze about to tickle my nose. I snapped my trap shut and let loose. My chest bellowed and my eyes bugged like a squeeze toy. Swallowing the ball of air back down to the depths from whence it came, I noticed the guard and the light were none the wiser. I had gone unnoticed. This seemed to have cleared my head; however, my mind still raced with questions. Were the lights in collusion with the guards, an extension of the Ranch's security? Were they actually highly advanced surveillance drones operated remotely by a shadowy government agent toying with a joystick in some dark bunker miles away, Area 51 perhaps?

The guard trotted back to his trailer, the light now inches from singeing his hair. Two conclusions came to mind. Either the two were working together like a baseball cooperating with the catcher's mitt, or the guard was for someone reason completely unaware of his ghostly companion.

Perhaps it was a simple question of dimensional windows and human perception. I believe the guard and the infernal light were unaware that I was there and like a fly on the ridge wall watching their every move. From my secret hideaway, I was able to steal a rare glimpse through a one way dimensional window into a paranormal peepshow, like a Skinwalker voyeur. It may have been the sharpness of the angle or the distance from the scene, but I was peering through an etheric wall which masked the light from the guard's eyes. Maybe there was no dimensional barrier at all, but something that correlates to human consciousness and perception.

I considered that the paranormal light source maintains a limited sphere of influence, no more than 300 feet or so. Within this limited field it can alter how the mind perceives reality. The light, tunnel, portal, or whatever the entity is, was able to hide itself from the guard, but not actually remove itself from being. It was alive and buzzing before me like a bee, a very large bee at that. But I was considerably further away than 300', beyond its field of influence. It couldn't alter my perception from that distance.

Assuming the paranormal source possesses the ability to manipulate human perception, it would nonetheless be limited by real world physics. Although it could successfully disappear from the mind, this illusionary sleight of hand might not so readily fool the eye. Our eyes function by collecting photons and then sending a message to the brain. The brain

translates these messages or signals to images. But the mind is fallible and can be fooled. Internal wires tend to cross, meaning becomes confused, and volatile emotions and hormones contribute to irrational conclusions. What the brain interprets can greatly differ from what the eyes actually see.

The phantom light's disappearing parlor trick may allow it to vanish from the mind, but it fails to betray our impartial eyes, which assign no meaning to what they observe. The light does not in actuality vanish from our sight, rather our brain simply fails to record its presence. What is real to the eye, the brain refuses to acknowledge.

I postulate this is the reason why the security cameras on pole #1 were destroyed in less time than it takes to bat an eye. The Trickster could not employ his typical deceptive tactics on the impartial camera's wires, circuits and electricity. However, it was child's play to rearrange the neutrons, synapses and chemicals of the malleable mind. The Hollywood phrase "the camera doesn't lie" irritated the Skinwalker's pointy ears and created a problem as it approached camera pole #1. To remain invisible, the Skinwalker was forced to take a short dimensional step out of time, and then correct the problem with a yank, a rip and a tear.

Twenty one

Not my problem

Had the price of looking been blindness, I would have looked.-Ralph Ellison
We're blind to our blindness. We have very little idea of how little we know. We're not designed to know how little we know.-Daniel Kahneman

The Skinwalker derives its magical ability to disappear by employing what I call the NMP Principal, or the ‘Not My Problem” theory. The concept of NMP is that the observer, in this case, let’s say the guard, cannot see, hear nor perceive the immediate problem because in his mind he believed the enigma to be, “Not my problem!”

The theory is should our eyes see something too bizarre or confusing, the mind protects itself by rationalizing that the world around it would be far more agreeable if it simply wasn’t there. Interpreted as not my problem, the brain erases it like a typo. If we were to stare directly at the source of stress, we would see right through it. It is a concept that relies on our natural

tendency to ignore that which we are not mentally prepared for, that which we refuse to accept as truth—in other words, all the supernatural nonsense we are too damn stubborn to explain away.

The NOP Principal, or the “Not Our Problem” concept, afflicts a much larger portion of the American population and has been responsible for eons of political shenanigans, expanding waist lines from a clown handing us fast food, and the Harlem Shake.

Fortified within my rocky tower, I stood a safe distance away as the ball of light generated its NMP field, a spell of blindness which befuddled the guard. A bang echoed through the canyons walls as the guard slammed his trailer door. The ball of light stood at the door step like a forgotten puppy waiting to come in. After a few moments, it shot off to join its companions spiraling over the field below. They were everywhere now, as if a portal to hell had ripped the earth open and unleashed a legion of demonic lights. They danced above the cattle heads, pulsating brighter and brighter. Three suddenly broke off from the group and floated towards the ridgeline, my ridgeline. A wet substance trickled down my cheek. I wiped it away not knowing if it was sweat or a tear.

Twenty two

Great balls of fire

We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.-Plato

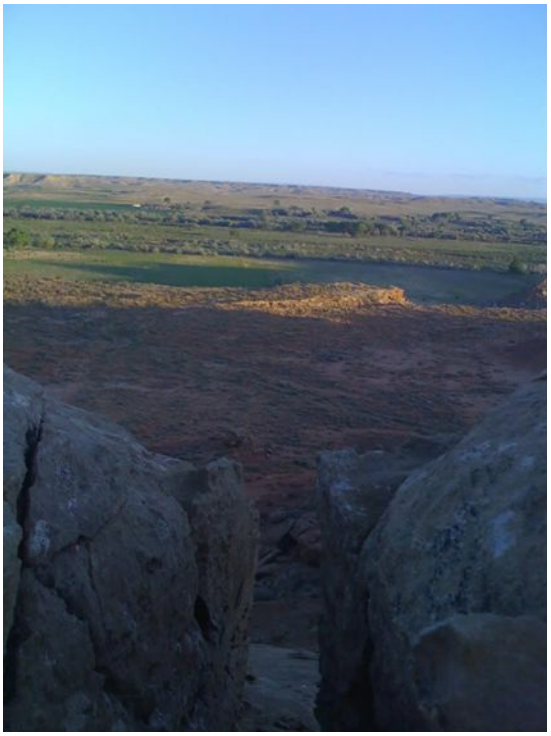
The trio of lights lighted up the nearby bait pen reminding me of the horrific mutilations done on the calves confined within. As they wound their way around the chain link fence surrounding the pen, the one out front dimmed to the size of a pin hole and then vanished. Like trains entering a tunnel, the trailing balls also winked out one by one.

A few heart stopping moments passed. In their absence, I mouthed a silent prayer begging for them to be gone for good. A dimly lit pea-sized ball appeared at the base of the ridge, and within seconds burned brighter than ever before. The two others emerged from the same dark space and blazed with an unearthly malice. I felt a sliver of ice stab into my heart, chilling my

blood and frosting my veins as the lights suddenly gave a sickening lurch up into the air.

"They are right below me!" my mind screamed.

The words haunted me; I desperately wished I was anywhere but where I was. With several hitching leaps the lights began to climb the cliff walls. Like a cockroach exposed to a kitchen light, I scampered for a safe hole to hide in. Finding none, I wedged myself between two large rocks, much too small a space to accommodate me and my gear. I ducked low and held my breath, my eyes searching the skies like a nervous golfer eyeballing the dark thunderheads of an approaching storm.

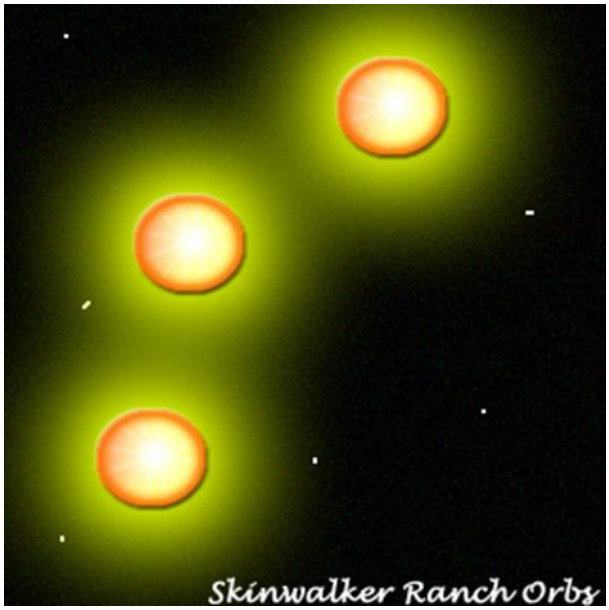


The two rocks where I hid myself

The night was silent. The noisy crickets put away their violins, the wind no longer blew its lonely tune, and if the coyotes were howling—it was silently in their heads. It was as if the desert herself hushed in fear of what lay below. Seconds passed like hours, minutes telescoped to centuries. My heart beat its drum: BANG, BANG, BANG—louder and louder. I wanted my heart to stop, and suddenly, it did. A god awful glow lit the ground around me. The night sky flashed into daylight; everything was bathed in a frightening greenish-yellow light. I could see my own shadow cast against the rock wall behind me, a black silhouette writhing painfully. My neck snapped up in an automated response. My eyes unwilling to look at what I might see.

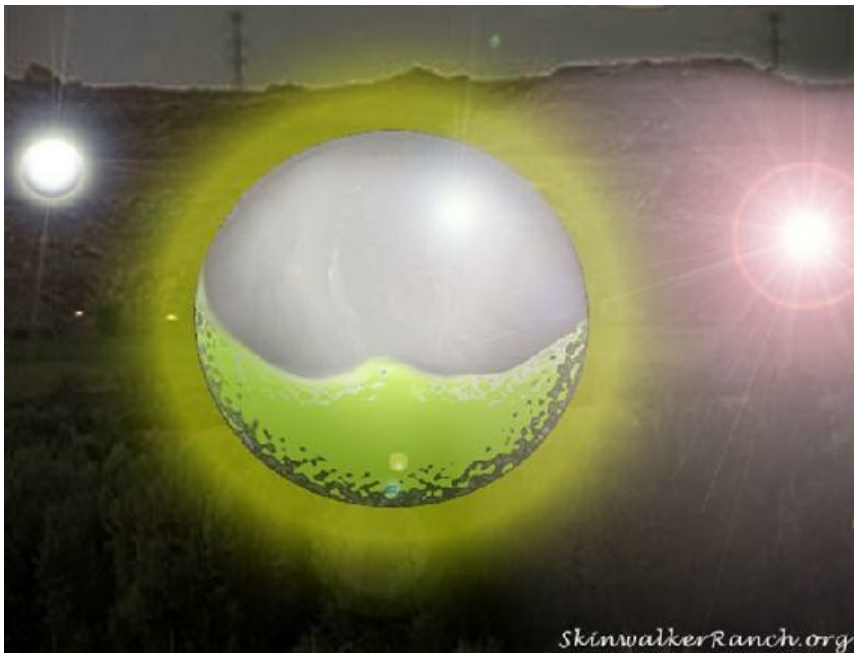
I saw three swirling balls of light a rocks throw from my head, exposing me like a trapped animal in their awful spotlight. I was transfixed by the sight above me, my eyes glittered with horror. The balls of light looked like three floating glass spheres. Swirling plasma churned within. What I saw no man should ever want to see. Yet, there I was, nonetheless alone and forced to take it all in. I was exposed and humbled as I groveled in the dirt before the light. My right hand lodged itself between my teeth in an effort to hold back a scream. I bit hard into my knuckles to contain it. The lights passed over and went dark. I stared into the infinite cosmos with eyes that jittered and shook in uncontrollable spasms. A magnificent tapestry of

stars sprinkled the sky above. Far off one star brighter than the rest twinkled. It was as if God Himself had offered a reassuring wink, knowing what monumental challenges he had prepared for me.



Sketch of the three orbs

A strange black fog enveloped the night sky, blanketing out the stars and rolling across the desert floor. When the objects beamed their light on me, I got the impression that something was taken from me. The Amish refuse to have their picture taken, possibly for good reason. They fear the photograph captures their immortal soul, forever imprisoning it there in that moment of time upon a synthetic sheet of plastic locked in pose for eternity.



I illustrated the scene as I remembered it

I felt something akin when struck by the beam. I felt as if the light had recorded me, captured me, took some intangible piece from deep inside and immortalized that moment. It had abducted my courage and extracted my sanity, both vanished with the light. Perhaps these puritanical superstitions were true! The Devil himself may have that image of me hung above his grizzly mantle fireplace, a frame made of my bones, my tendons its bindings, the picture imprinted upon my stretched skin. And a sad picture it makes, me there sprawled across the ground, kissing the dirt and clutching a rock like a child nurtures a blanket.

I had to get a hold of myself. I was losing touch with reality, or perhaps reality was the one losing touch with me, as the outside world no

longer behaved in a rational manner. The bubble of space encompassing me no longer belonged to Utah, nor was it Skinwalker Ranch; I wasn't even sure I was on planet Earth. I was in some unexplainable netherworld, the no-man's zone of the weird. I had taken my first step into Oz, the return home impossible. This was a one-way trip to madness.

Staring into the sky, I wished upon a fog covered star to take me home, take me anywhere but here. But wishes are for fairy tales. I knew the worst was yet to come. The nightmare had just begun, the display above had a purpose. The visitors were on their way, riding the dark wings of the fog. They were coming. The Skinwalker demanded a personal meeting, and he wasn't to be denied.

Twenty three

The Skinwalker cometh

"Do the thing you fear most and the death of fear is certain." Mark Twain

No matter how deep I crammed my fist into my throat, this next scream broke in a guttural shriek. Hiding behind the rock walls, I peeked my eyes over the edge like a periscope breaking the surface of the sea. My eyes widened. The balls of light slammed into the earth some 20 feet from my foxhole. A rectangle of light crept across the ground towards me as if the door to a lit room had opened somewhere in the darkness. My eyes involuntarily turned away. Nonetheless, I forced them forward. My thirst for answers and my impudent curiosity were ready to welcome the madness, the paralyzing fear swept away. The answers were coming.

We all have a purpose, and in the next few moments mine was to be fulfilled. A trace memory of my recurring dreams from years earlier entered

my mind. A nightmare, a vision, or prophesy—I wasn't sure which, but it flashed before me. It was night, I was wandering through a desert much like this one, staring over a rocky ledge, trembling with fear. From the darkness something stared back at me, watching me with terrible red glowing eyes. I awoke drenched in a pool of my own oily sweat. I knew that the monster from that nightmare had managed to look past the dream and into my world, the waking world. From across the dreamscape it saw me!

The Déjà vu was unmistakable as the doorway of light widened. It was a movie that had played over and over in my mind. I knew what was coming for me next. This time, Iryna's soft supple bosom wasn't there to comfort me as I cried away the memories of this nightmare. There was no gas pedal for me to tromp on, rocketing me from this horror.

What will you do when the Arch Angel blows his mighty trumpet heralding Judgment Day? Will you resonate in peace with the tune, or plug your ears in terror?

I choose to embrace the call. Driven by a will which was not my own, I emerged from my shallow hole to face my judgment. At that moment I let go of the scared child of my past, the one who had tagged along with me all these years longing for answers, begging to know why he was haunted by the shadows and voices which terrorized him at night.

For the first time in my life, I stood unafraid to face the unknown. I

felt the fearful child of my past blow away with the dirt beneath me as I walked confidently towards the light. The doorway had closed and something had come through. The black sheet of fog which had blotted out the stars and stained the ground began to suddenly collapse upon itself. It was a living cloth of darkness, its tentacles blacker than the surrounding night. Thick tendrils of living fog recoiled into a single point, twisting and spiraling as it did so. A miniature whirlwind of blackness spun before me. From this spinning knot of darkness the Skinwalker emerged. Thick mangy hair bristled across a body that was much too large to be a mere wolf. It stalked towards me upon all fours. It eyes locked with my own. I was hypnotized by them. I was lost within their endless black depths; within them lay the secrets to the universe.

I stood transfixed and immobilized as they bore into me from a body that had no beating heart. I took a step forward, my newfound courage felt suicidal as I committed to the next step. Only a bird-brained fool would lack the common sense to sprint as far and as fast as his pumping legs would carry him to escape this living nightmare.

The eyes of the Skinwalker compelled me, called me and beckoned me forward. There was no breaking from its gaze. In that moment, I realized why I continued to advance. I was enacting my own nightmare with each step, replaying each terrifying scene as I drew closer and closer, my feet

dragging across the sandy floor leaving behind a snake like trail, as if pulled by an invisible force.

Not the actual Skinwalker

I stood face to face with this traveler from beyond the stars, from beyond even time itself. I inhaled rapid gasps of air, keeping pace with the machine gun fire of my heartbeat. We were now pressed eye to eye, face to fang.

To my relief, the wolf's glassy charcoal eyes did not erupt into flames, nor did it snarl or snap at my face. As my chest pumped like an overworked piston, I noticed the wolf did not take breath. It stood still like a lifeless statue of a medieval gargoyle, beautiful and foreboding.

A funny thought wrinkled its way into my brain. I had a sudden urge to reach out and touch its matted, mange ridden muzzle. My arm wavered and

inched up slightly, my fingers twitched with a palsied, arthritic tremble. I thought better of it, and kept my hand safely planted at my side.

We stared at one another for what felt like hours. If there was an exchange of information, I was not consciously privy to the unspoken conversation. There was no smell, no sound, no lights, just the lifeless desert, myself and the wolf.

In a way that transcends written words, or even how we might imagine telepathy to be, the creature imparted its secrets to me. I instantly knew the knowledge it shared with me. It was as if those thoughts had always been locked away buried deep in my head.

The wolf dusted off an old memory in the cluttered attic of my mind. It shared several vague secrets. I learned it was an entity older than my understanding of time. Also, that it was an integral part of our world in such a way that I lack the words to ever properly convey. Most enlightening was that the Skinwalker was not to be feared, rather it exists as a timeless heirloom decorating our mysterious world, and like all heirlooms it should be revered, treasured and respected by man until the end of time.

Twenty four

It’s got me!

When you can't make them see the light, make them feel the heat. -Ronald Reagan

A shrilled shriek squelched from the walkie-talkie buried somewhere in my jacket. “Ryan, Ryan, you need to get over here NOW!”

The star light reflecting off the Skinwalker’s black lifeless eyes glittered and beamed. It turned to leave. As it did so, I noticed its paws seemed to singe the earth below leaving a trail of smoke in its wake. Or was this merely a plume of dust fleeing from the torched touch of its demonic claws? A large rock rested nearby like a crooked monolith amongst a sea of smaller tombstones. A fierce wind blew, racing across the wolf’s mangled hair with invisible fingers that raked across its crooked spine. The wolf approached the rock and gave a passing glance back at me. Its eyes sparkled with contempt for the radio’s intrusion.

“Ryan! Are you getting this? There is something here with me. I need you to get back here now!” my brother screamed in a hoarse voice across the radio.

I looked down, palming my radio, unsure of what to do next. And that was all it took. In that fraction of a second, the Skinwalker and all its esoteric secrets was gone. The Trickster had cast his final spell, vanishing into the desert night.

I trembled with shock from all I had seen. The radio in my hand felt like a foreign object, the voice on the other end, the gibberish ramblings of a stranger. Not knowing what to do with this block of plastic, I held it to my ear.

The voice, in a tone that sounded to be on the verge of tears, pleaded, “Please, get back here. I can’t do this alone.”

Knowing my younger brother, the tears had likely already fallen, masked by this feigned bravado. In my stupor, I placed the radio against my lips like a jellybean—close enough to taste, but not quite close enough to be sure of the flavor. It looked and smelled, however, a bit like black licorice. I held it back at an arm’s length.

“Ryan, if you’re there, I need you,” squawked the radio.

The realization that it was my brother’s voice I was hearing came like a crisp slap to my face. Reality flooded my mind and ignited my already red

hot nerves. Wrestling the radio with both hands, I shouted into it, “Oh my God, Tyson! Are you ok? What the hell is happening to you?”

The radio silence was thick and suffocating. The hissing static coming from the radio was words only understood by my nervous system. My mind tortured me with pictures of my brother’s impending death. The radio suddenly emitted a beeping alarm. No voice could be heard, only the long buzz of the tiny speaker, rattling somewhere deep inside the walkie-talkie and threatening to shake apart any moment as it beeped and buzzed.

I recognized the tone immediately; my brother’s finger must be jammed tight against the radio’s emergency button. I put my quest for enlightenment on hold and made a mad dash towards our campsite. I was responsible for bringing my brother into this nightmare, and if it killed me, damn it, I would get him out! I thought to myself, “This is my cross to bear, not his,” as I sped across the desert.

Along the way I tripped on a rock, spilling my radio across the desert floor. The radio skittered off into the darkness. On hands and knees, I sifted through the sand. Feeling the familiar touch of plastic, I pounced at the dirt like a cat toying with a dead mouse.

The cheap radio had shattered like a vase. I flipped the button off and then back on. A dim yellow light flashed across the cracked screen. The good news was that the walkie-talkie no longer squealed its awful alarm. The bad

news, you ask? It now coughed and wheezed in asthmatic static-like screeches that may or may not have been my brother's pleading voice.

Whatever he was trying to communicate, it sounded deadly urgent.

I raced past the power lines, which luckily held their parade of demons at bay. The electric eels above gave a nonchalant buzz as I passed by. I dove under the barbed fence which managed to dig in and hold me tight with spiky claws. I pealed myself off its barbed fingers like a hot wax strip tearing out a stubborn follicle. I ran for all I was worth, and then pushed it a bit more, as I steamed towards our camp. The beam of my flashlight flayed about, bouncing off this rock and the next. I scaled the rocky obstacle course which stood between me and my brother. The gnarled wooden finger of an old tree plucked the hat right off my head. I let it keep its prize, paying little attention, as I feverishly raced forward.

I could see the campsite off in the distance. Half a mile away I could make out the miniature toy car I had rented nestled between two bleak hills. A child's tent hid somewhere in the shadows below.

My brother was nowhere to be seen.

As I left the Skinwalker's Path, the miles of running through the moonless desert had come to end. So too ended my paranormal journey. An icy electronic scream echoed across my radio, followed by a few broken words. Each syllable crackled and hissed between the silences. Those last

few electronic beeps and gurgles sounded as if he was saying, “There is a light…It’s here with me now…It’s got me! I NEED…”

The sound of a thousand snakes hissing and rattling was the last noise my broken shell of plastic would ever produce. The batteries had given up their chemical ghost, the screen forever went dark. A light flashed in the distance.

“Tyson, is that you?” I yelled across the distance that separated me from our campsite. I kept my feet moving, long strides fueled by adrenaline and the dread that I felt.

That light had disappeared and I was moving in the direction I had last seen it. Before I realized it, I was stumbling forward into the clearing. There in the darkness I could make out the outline of that stupid tent. I went into a slide riding my knees across the stone littered ground oblivious to the pain I would no doubt reconsider later.

I came to a tumbling halt before the zippered opening and ripped the zipper up. Throwing aside the flaps, I came face to face with my brother. He was up on his knees and poised with the vodka bottle gripped by the neck in his hand and raised ready to smash it down upon my head.

It took us both a moment to gather our wits and he was the first to move, lowering the bottle.

We both let out a short laugh of relief, happy to see each other.

Working to catch my breath, I nodded towards the vodka. “I’m glad you didn’t smash me with that thing,” I said, “because I really need a drink.”

THE END